

Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji & Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road



A HISTORICAL JOURNEY

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Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji

The First Edition of this book was launched by the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board in July 2006 to commemorate the 150th Anniversary of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji.



The 150th Anniversary Logo above depicts Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji at the entrance to the Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial, Singapore.

The Revised Second Edition of this book was launched by the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board in July 2015 to commemorate the 50th Anniversary of the Independence of Singapore (SG50).



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Dr. Choor Singh Sidhu for allowing the adaptation of a significant portion of the material in this book from articles and books written by him and his contribution towards documenting the history and development of the Sikhs in Singapore.



Dr. Choor Singh was a Justice in the Supreme Court of Singapore. He was a very prominent Sikh community leader and also the Founder, Trustee and Patron of Singapore Khalsa Association.



Thakral Parwar for sponsoring the publishing of this book.

S. Sarjit Singh s/o Niranjan Singh for his contribution of some of the maps and photographs used in this book.



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*Kartar Singh Thakral doing the honours at the
Official Opening of Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road in October 1995*

Foreword

A large number of Sikhs and some non-Sikhs hold Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji in great admiration and reverence. They visit the Gurdwara built in his memory at Silat Road many times a week to recite Gurbani in the presence of Sri Guru Granth Sahib for blessings. Indeed, Guru Ji has showered blessings on all those who have prayed with devotion and sincerity at the Memorial Gurdwara.

This 2 revisions of the book "Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji & Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road" are very apt to commemorate and celebrate first, the 150th Anniversary of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji in 2006 and second, the 50th Anniversary of the independence of Singapore in 2015.

Chapter 1 depicts Bhai Ji's earlier life immersed totally in Nam Simran (meditation) and Sewa (service to community). The 2nd and 3rd chapters based on the well researched book on Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji by Retd Justice Dr. Choor Singh Sidhu gives very succinct and detailed account of Bhai Ji's struggle for independence of Punjab from the British rule. In addition, the chapters give a thorough description of Bhai Ji's arrest by the British, his exile from Punjab and his life in Singapore.

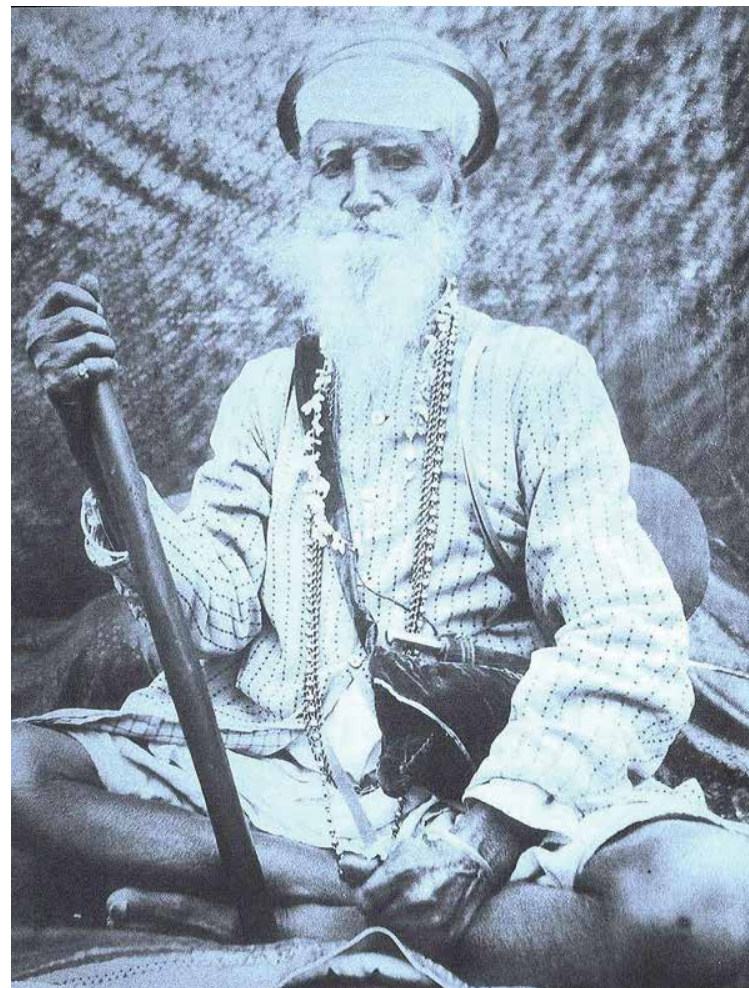
The reader also gets a good understanding of the path taken by Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji to be a saint soldier and when the time came, he stood firm and fought for freedom.

The 2nd part of the book traces the history of Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road. This Gurdwara Sahib was built by the Singapore Sikh Police, which later came under the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board together with the Central Sikh Temple.

In 2000, Gurdwara Silat Road Sikh Centre, a 7-storey building was added to the Gurdwara to provide additional social and educational services. The reader will acquire a good understanding of the history of the Gurdwara and services it provides now to Sikhs and non-Sikhs alike in Singapore.

This publication is very timely for Sikhs and particularly for youths to understand Sikh history and Sikh heritage. I commend and congratulate the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board for compiling and publishing this book in conjunction with the celebrations of 150th Anniversary of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji in 2006 and the 50th Anniversary of Singapore in 2015.

Kartar Singh Thakral



Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji
A Saint Soldier 1770 -1856

CHAPTER I

Early Life of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji



Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji holding court

Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji was born in the village of Rabbon in Ludhiana district on 3rd January (Lohri day), 1770. His father, Sardar Gurmukh Singh, named him Nihal Singh. He had two brothers, Gurdial Singh and Gurbakhash Singh.

His father sent him to a religious school to learn Gurmukhi and Gurbani. The school Head noticed Nihal Singh's great interest in religion and spirituality and sent him to Saint Tota Singh Thikirawala. There he acquired higher religious education. He studied Vedas and Guru Granth Sahib. Together with the religious knowledge, he advanced spiritually by reciting the name of God (Nam Simran) day and night.

Whilst Bhaiji was completing his studies with Saint Tota Singh, a well-known saint of the time, Bhai Bir Singh Ji came to his village. Nihal Singh was in the large congregation that listened to the discourse by Bhai Bir Singh Ji. Nihal Singh was so impressed with the discourse that he decided to be a disciple of Bhai Bir Singh Ji. He followed Bhai Bir Singh Ji to his 'Dera' in Nourangabad. There Nihal Singh did great seva in the langgar for many years, took Amrit at the hands of Bhai Bir Singh and became his chela. Upon taking Amrit he was given the name of Bhagwan Singh.



Bhai Ji's interest in Gurbani started early in life

The story goes that Nihal Singh would bring water daily without fail for Bhai Bir Singh Ji to take a bath. After Bhai Bir Singh Ji had taken his bath, Nihal Singh would take charge of preparing Guru Ka Langgar (food) for the morning congregation. When the prayer sessions were in progress, Nihal Singh would clean the shoes of the members of the congregation while reciting God's name (Naam Simran). It was well known at the time that the Guru Ka Langgar (food) prepared by Nihal Singh never ran short no matter how big the congregation was. Occasionally there were as many as 10,000 people in the congregation. Bhai Nihal Singh did his sewa (service) with love and dedication while reciting God's name. While serving people, he would call everyone Maharaj Ji and in turn he become to be known as Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji.

There is a story that circulated about Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji. One day, he was at the big hot plate making chapattis. He heard another Sewadar (volunteer) calling him to attend to a big pot of lentils boiling over. He rushed to the pot and put his arm into the pot to stir and stop it from boiling over. The lentils thus stopped overflowing however there was no sign of any burn on the arm of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji.

Bhai Bir Singh Ji heard about the incident and called Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji. Bhai Bir Singh Ji told him that the Sikhs are prohibited

from showing off their spiritual power. Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji replied that he was not aware of what he did. At that time he was fully absorbed in the name of God. Nevertheless, Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji apologised and promised that it would not happen again. Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji devoted his early life to service to humanity and to 'Nam Simran'.



Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji's Slotter at his Dera in Amritsar



Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji in one of his "freedom" battles with the British

CHAPTER II

Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji The Saint Soldier

*Adapted from Dr Choor Singh Sidhu's book
"Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji, Martyr of the Sikh Faith"*



Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji in his Darbar

Sikhs started coming to Singapore on their own in the fourth quarter of the nineteenth century. Before that, in the middle of that century, when Singapore served as the Government of India's penal settlement, some prisoners were sent here to serve long terms of imprisonment. Some of these prisoners are believed to have been Sikhs but no records are available to verify their names or their number. There is, however, evidence of a very important political prisoner by the name of Bhai Maharaj Singh and his chela (disciple) Khurruck Singh having been deported to Singapore by the British in 1850 and Bhai Maharaj Singh is recorded to have died in prison in Singapore in 1856.

To understand who Bhai Maharaj Singh was and why he was deported to Singapore, it is necessary to delve a little into Sikh history. When the mighty Maharajah Ranjit Singh,



Maharajah Ranjit Singh

who conquered and ruled the whole of North India for 40 years, died in 1839, there followed several holocausts and bloodbaths in which several of his descendants perished. Eventually in 1843 Ranjit Singh's youngest son, Dalip Singh aged 7 years, was proclaimed Maharajah of the Punjab with his mother Rani Jinda as the President of the Regency Council, but the Punjab came into the effective control of the Dogras. Palace intrigues continued. The danger of external aggression and internal dissension made the Army the most powerful element in the State. But the Punjab was leaderless. A man who came to the fore was one Bhai Bir Singh, a retired soldier turned ascetic.

Bhai Bir Singh was the son of Sardar Seva Singh, an officer in Maharajah Ranjit Singh's army. Bir Singh followed his father's footsteps and became a soldier in the troops of the Attari Sardars. Being very religious, he resigned and became a chela (disciple) of Baba Sahib Singh Bedi of Una, a much venerated direct descendant of Guru Nanak through lineal descent from Baba Lachmi Das, the second son of Guru Nanak. Baba Sahib Singh Bedi had taken Amrit at the hands of Baba Soba Singh Sodhi at Anandpur who had earlier taken Amrit at the hands of Bhai Daya Singh in the presence of Guru Gobind Singh. Bhai Daya Singh was one of the Panj Pyare (first five baptised disciples) of Guru Gobind Singh. Baba Sahib Singh Bedi helped Maharajah Ranjit Singh considerably to consolidate his position as a Sovereign ruler of the Punjab. He was highly respected by all the Sikh Chiefs on account of his sanctity, courage and political vision. He has been described by some writers as the father of the Sikh nation. After Baba Sahib Singh Bedi's death his disciple, Bhai Bir Singh, who had his Dera (Gurdwara) at the village of Naurangabad, held the same position as his preceptor. Maharajah Ranjit Singh had great reverence for him. His Dera was a sanctuary for the nobles of the Court of Lahore, who for some reason or other sought asylum in its precincts. No political refugee was ever arrested or harassed by the government of the day while he was living there.



Bhai Bir Singh

Bhai Bir Singh's Dera was practically a military camp, for, he had attending to him a volunteer army of 1,200 musket men and 3,000 horsemen. Over 1,500 pilgrims were fed in his kitchen every day. Bhai Bir Singh enjoyed the reverence of the whole Sikh people. He was treated almost as a Guru. In times of national crisis, Sikh soldiers and the peasants used to turn to him for guidance.



Bhai Sahib Bhai Daya Singh Ji

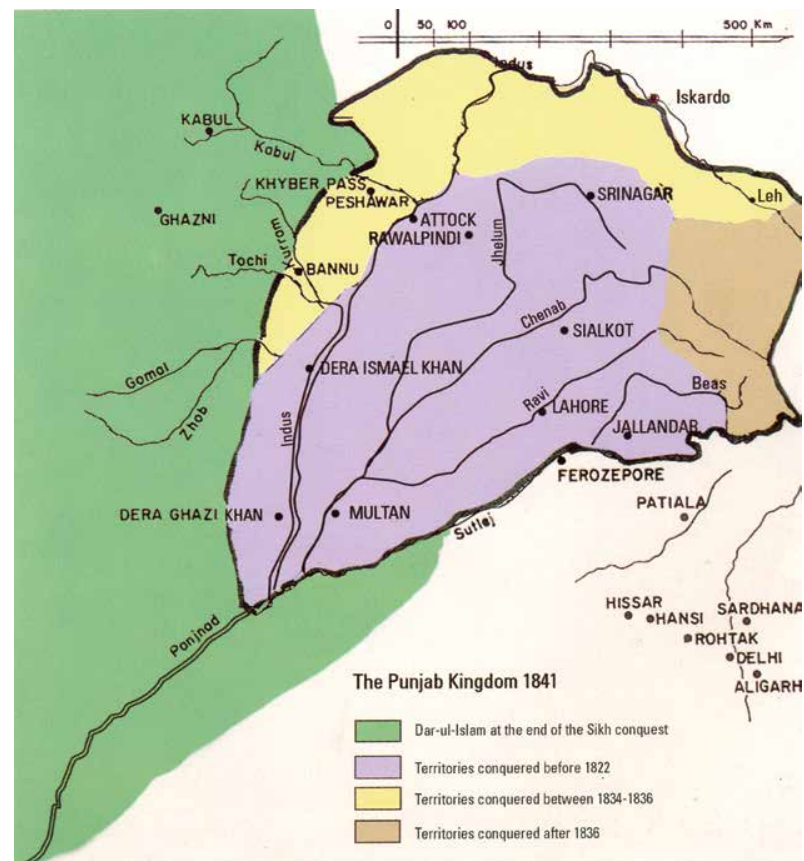
Bhai Bir Singh's camp became the centre of Sikh revolt against Dogra dominance over the Punjab. Many dissidents such as General Attar Singh Sandhanwalia and claimants to the throne such as Prince Kashmira Singh and Prince Pashaura Singh sheltered in

Succession Lineage of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji Sanctuary or Dera to Bhai Sahib Bhai Daya Singh Ji.
Bhai Daya Singh Ji was one of the Panj Pyare of Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji.



Map of Punjab; During the Regime of Maharaja Ranjit Singh

Bhai Bir Singh's camp. Hira Singh Dogra, the then vazeer (Prime Minister) of the Punjab did not consider his position safe as long as Bhai Bir Singh and General Attar Singh were alive. In 1844, Hira Singh Dogra attacked Bhai Bir Singh's camp with twenty



thousand troops and 50 cannons. Several hundred men including General Attar Singh, Prince Kashmira Singh and Bhai Bir Singh were killed.

After this horrible holocaust, Bhai Bir Singh's disciple Bhai Maharaj Singh was installed as successor to Bhai Bir Singh as Head of the Sanctuary or Dera. The British who had been waiting on the sidelines and biding their time, now decided that this was the most opportune time to intervene in the Punjab and establish their authority in the land of the five rivers. They arrested Maharani Jinda and deported her. Bhai Maharaj Singh who was held in as great esteem as his predecessor by the peasantry and the nobility, acclaimed her. Bhai Maharaj Singh was arrested by the British but he managed to escape. He eluded the police and addressed huge meetings in Central Punjab, exhorting the people to rise and expel the foreigners. Resentment against the British began to mount during the Anglo-Sikh Wars that followed. At the battles of Ram Nagar, Chillianwala and Gujrat, Bhai Maharaj Singh used to move about among the soldiers inspiring them to fight the enemy with courage and determination. Apart from providing personal inspiration he took upon himself the arduous task of maintaining supplies of food and fodder to the men and animals in the operations against the British. For this purpose he opened a number of supply centres and used a large number of caravans of camels to transport the supplies. After the defeat of the Sikhs at Gujrat, Bhai Maharaj Singh and Bedi Bikram Singh were in favour of continuing the struggle, but the rest of the Chiefs favoured surrender.

Bikram Singh Bedi was the son of Baba Sahib Singh Bedi and had been baptised at the hands of Bhai Bir Singh as was Bhai Maharaj Singh. On that account Bikram Singh Bedi and Bhai Maharaj Singh were Gur-Bhaies or brethren-in-faith and in the campaigns of 1848-1849 against the British, they declared a Dharam Yudh (holy war) against the British and fought together valiantly exhorting the Khalsa to destroy the FARANGEE MALECHAS (Dirty Foreigners).



Maharani Jinda, wife of Maharajah Ranjit Singh

“
Dharam Yudh to destroy
Farangee Malechas
”

The surrender of all other Chiefs left no alternative for Bhai Maharaj Singh but to continue the struggle alone because Bedi Bikram Singh was soon afterwards arrested and died in prison at Amritsar.

With the fateful decision, started the second phase of Bhai Maharaj Singh's revolutionary career. Bhai Maharaj Singh on hearing of Rani Jinda's deportation joined the fray against the British which Mul Raj, the Governor of Multan, had started. He exhorted the people to join Mul Raj's colours. It was during this period that Bhai Maharaj Singh established himself as a shrewd statesman. His first task was to restore confidence in the minds of the Sikhs who, as a result of defeat in the recent battles and the consequent annexation of the kingdom, had been left completely demoralised and humiliated.

“
Spirit of Chardi Kelah
”

Bhai Maharaj Singh, in order to succeed in his mission, was forced to fight on a number of fronts, a task not so easy to achieve single-handedly. In spite of this he did not lose heart. He mapped out a programme of action. He retired to the jungles and ravines of the Khumb Valley, and, at Sugowal he gave the finishing touches to his future course of action which included, amongst others the following:

1. A plan to take away Maharajah Dalip Singh from the Lahore Fort to a place in the hills of the Punjab and to restart the freedom struggle in his name.
2. To organise a United Front of all persons and interests who had suffered at the hands of the British.

Given his personal experience during the conflict, that it was not easy to defeat the British in open battle, he developed a programme of disrupting the administrative machinery of the British by subversion and surprise attacks on their treasuries and cantonments. With total disregard for his personal safety, he mapped out strategic positions where he would institute surprise raids. To sustain his

supporters during the impending struggle, he stored grain, fodder and ammunition in various places in the Doab, where the struggle was to begin. He sent emissaries to the Amir of Kabul and the various Pathan Chiefs in the North-West imploring their co-operation in the task he was undertaking. As expected, he left nothing to chance and went into the most minute detail of his battle plans before executing the actions.

The British, who had by then conquered the whole of India, were too powerful and sophisticated as well as too crafty for Bhai Maharaj Singh. They foiled his plan to kidnap Maharajah Dalip Singh from



Maharaja Dalip Singh,
The Last Emperor
of Punjab

“
Planning for offensive
”

the Lahore Palace, and soon after removed he young Prince to a distant place in India, quite beyond the reach of the Punjab rebels. They set after Bhai Maharaj Singh, some zealous Muslim informers whose fidelity to the British was beyond doubt. They branded Bhai Maharaj Singh as dangerous rebel. They also announced a large reward for anyone giving any clue to the whereabouts of Bhai Maharaj Singh. The British also threatened that anyone found helping Bhai Maharaj Singh would have to face dire consequences. The result of these measures was that the faint hearted began to keep away from Bhai Maharaj Singh.

“
Large reward for
information on the
whereabouts of
Bhai Ji
”



Bhai ji always kept a mini
Gutka with him even in
battle.



Bhai ji's mini Gutkas neatly
packed for portability with
respect.

The Governor-General of India, Lord Dalhousie reported the activities of the saint soldier in these words:

“Shortly after the banishment of the Rani and the revolt of Mul Raj, Bhai Maharaj Singh raised the standard of rebellion in the Punjab. He speedily collected many thousand men, traversed the districts to the north of the Doab, was everywhere received with favour and gathered numbers daily. In the meantime the Bhai received urgent appeals from Dewan Mul Raj to join him at Multan which he agreed to do”.



Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji's Chakras



Double edged Kirpans used by Bhai Maharaj Singh to fight the British

“
The Guru is no ordinary
man
”

wrote Vansittart, referring to
Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji

Troops were sent in pursuit of Bhai Maharaj Singh. They overtook him near Chenab and inflicted heavy casualties on his followers. Bhai Maharaj Singh escaped and joined Mul Raj. On the night of December 28, 1849, Bhai Maharaj Singh, on whose head was a prize of Rs 10,000 was captured with a band of 21 unarmed followers near Adampur, on information supplied by a Mohammedan informer. “The Guru is no ordinary man” wrote Vansittart, the Deputy Commissioner of Jalandhar who arrested him. “He is to the natives what Christ was to the most zealous of Christians. His miracles were seen by tens of thousands, and are more implicitly believed than those worked by the ancient prophets”.

Bhai Maharaj Singh was the man who during 1847-49 took upon himself the impossible task of saving the Sovereign Kingdom of the Sikhs from extinction. He deserved the credit for having kept up the struggle against the British even after the Punjab was annexed in March 1849. During Bhai Maharaj Singh's revolutionary career he demonstrated superb military generalship and knowledge of tactical warfare. What sustained Bhai Maharaj Singh in this arduous task was his rich spiritual heritage. The dire state of affairs prevailing in the Sikh kingdom and the nefarious designs of the Ruled British, compelled him to abandon the career of a Saint and take to the sword in the true tradition of a Khalsa of Guru Gobind Singh.

Even the British against whom he fought, grudgingly admired his courage and his military skills. MacLeod, Commissioner of the Doab, in his report to the Governor-General of India, after a thorough review of the activities of Bhai Maharaj Singh wrote:

“
The spirit of bold and
reckless daring
”

“It is, I think, impossible to regard without feelings of astonishment, the spirit of bold and reckless daring, as well as the devotion to his person, evinced by the followers of the Guru nor can it be doubted, in my opinion that had he remained at large, but a little while longer one or more outrages of an alarming character would have been attempted, by at least some

hundreds men actuated by a spirit of fierce resolution and indifference to life the result of which, even though more or less unsuccessful, as they must have been, it would perhaps be impossible to foretell."

"It appears to me certain, that the Guru was in some respects a very remarkable man. He seems to have possessed and exhibited very great sagacity and self reliance and while, as stated by all his followers, he was exceedingly reserved in so much that his intentions were in reality fully known to none but himself until indicated by their result. He evinced an uncommon aptitude for forming general plans and having these simultaneously carried out by different agents, acting independently, marks of great forethought and design on the part of the Guru, are apparent throughout all the narratives and the same characteristic has evidently distinguished him throughout his career, for it is alleged, that great as were the vicissitude trials and troubles, through which the Khalsa Army had to pass, during both campaigns the Guru alone, was never found without resources, any number of persons who might resort to him and hundreds, and sometimes it is said, thousands, did so being quite sure of obtaining from him their daily meal for the purpose of providing which, he carried about with him scores of cooks or langris, and the requisite materials".

“
Bhai Ji had an uncommon
aptitude for planning
”

“
The British felt it was too
risky to keep Bhai Ji on
trial in India
”

From the Punjab, Bhai Maharaj Singh and his disciple, Khurruck Singh, were taken to Calcutta. There, the Governor-General in Council decided that it was too risky to put Bhai Maharaj Singh on trial in India and decided to deport him together with his disciple to Singapore to be confined there as State Prisoners. From Calcutta, Bhai Maharaj Singh and his disciple Khurruck Singh were sent to Singapore on board the ship "Mohamed Shah" escorted by a guard of one sergeant, one corporal and six privates, all Europeans. The State Prisoners were given a good cabin for their accommodation. The ship had been specially chartered for the purpose for Rs 2000. On 7th of May 1850, the Secretary to the Governor-General at Calcutta wrote to the Governor of the Straits Settlements as follows:

7th May 1850

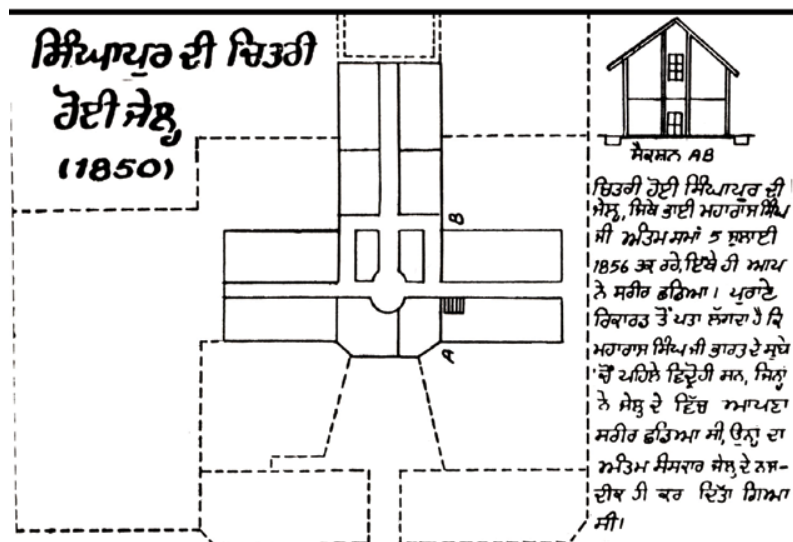
To: Government of the Straits Settlements

Sir,

The letter and the accompanying Warrant will be delivered to you by the Sergeant in command of the Escort which conveys to Singapore the Two State Prisoners named in the Warrant.

2. I am directed to inform you that the safe custody of the prisoner Bhai Mahanuj Singh is considered to be of great importance to the Government and that it is necessary therefore that he should be closely and carefully watched. It will not at the same time be forgotten that he is a State Prisoner, and that as such he should not be treated with unnecessary vigor.
3. It occurred to the Governor General, when His Lordship was in Singapore, that one of the Upper Rooms of the new jail, as being both healthy and secure, would probably be the most fitting place to select for the confinement of the prisoners and I am directed accordingly to request that this may, if possible, be arranged.
4. It will of course be necessary, at least for some time to come, to have a special Military Guard set over the Prisoners and the Governor General thinks it will also be desirable that some trustworthy non-Commissioned European Officer, or Government servant of some class, should be especially appointed for their custody. Some small additional allowance may be given for the duty.
5. No one should be admitted to the apartment occupied by the Prisoners except with the knowledge of this office, and he should himself see the prisoners at least twice a day.
6. The Assistant to the Resident Councillor at Singapore should visit the Prisoners once a week or oftener if necessary, and report to you any communication which they may be desirous of making.
7. You are requested yourself to submit to Government from time to time reports regarding the prisoners.
8. You will have the goodness to direct a passage to be engaged in some vessel for the return of the Escort to Calcutta.

I have etc.
Sd. Offg. Secy.



Layout of Outram Prison where Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji was imprisoned.



Outram Prison in the 1850s

The warrant for the detention of the State Prisoners was in the following terms:

WARRANT

To : The Governor of the Straits Settlements

Sir

Whereas the President in Council for good and sufficient reasons has seen fit to determine that Bhai Maharaj Singh and Khurruck Singh, shall be placed under personal restraint at Singapore, you are hereby required and commanded, in pursuance of the determination, to receive the prisoners above named into your custody and to deal with them in conformity to the orders of the Governor General in Council and the provisions of Regulation III of 1818.

Fort William

7th May 1850

In another letter dated 9th May 1850, the Secretary to the Governor-General in Calcutta gave the following instructions:

"His Excellency in Council requests that the Sergeant may be instructed to remove the irons from the prisoners as soon as the vessel is left by the pilot at sea, and to transfer them to the custody of the authorities at Singapore without irons."

The ship "Mohamed Shah" arrived safely in Singapore on 9th July 1850 and the State Prisoners, Bhai Maharaj Singh and his disciple, Khurruck Singh, were locked up in one of the upper rooms of the New Jail at Outram Road. There was later some talk of transferring them to Fort Cornwallis in Penang but this proposal was, after much discussion, abandoned, and the two State Prisoners spent the rest of their lives confined in Her Majesty's Jail in Singapore. They were supplied with rations which included many articles not allowed to ordinary prisoners and Khurruck Singh who has been described as Bhai Maharaj Singh's Tehlia (Personal Attendant) had to do the cooking but after some time when he protested, the Government employed a special cook at \$4 per mensem to do their cooking.

Examination of the correspondence between the Governor of the Straits Settlements and the Governor-General in Calcutta shows that the conduct of Bhai Maharaj Singh was "unexceptional" but that of Khurruck Singh evinced a "little of the untoward demeanour". Khurruck Singh had often "given vent to his temper by refusing food, tearing the clothes off his back and throwing things at the guard".

Although the Governor-General, Lord Dalhousie, was kind enough to allow a personal attendant, Bhai Khurruck Singh, to accompany Bhai Maharaj Singh to Singapore and direct that the two State Prisoners "should not be treated with unnecessary rigour" the authorities in Singapore were not so kind. They complied with the suggestion of the Governor-General that Bhai Maharaj Singh and his disciple should be locked up "in one of the upper rooms" of the new jail in Outram Road which was considered by him as "both healthy and secure" but they went much further and overdid the security precautions. For example, the two windows in Bhai Maharaj Singh's cell were walled up and a strong iron gate was put up in the verandah to separate it entirely from the rest of the building. The total area of the cell was hardly 40 feet by 15 feet, which, because of the walling up of the windows, had been "further rendered dark, dinghy and absolutely unhealthy" (Secret Consultation Papers, 28th Feb 1851, Nos. 52-57). The result was that the upper room, which had been seen by Lord Dalhousie on a previous visit to Singapore, and described by him as "healthy and secure", was converted by the local authorities into a dungeon; it was in this dungeon that Bhai Maharaj Singh spent the last six years of his life. After nearly three years of solitary confinement, Bhai Maharaj Singh was not only practically blind but had also developed rheumatic pains in his feet and ankles. This is borne out by the following medical report:

To: "The Hon'ble T. Church Esqre,
Resident Councillor

Sir,

I have the honour to report that during the half year, ending June 30th, 1853, "Maharaj Singh," state prisoner in H.M. Jail, has complained frequently of pain and swelling of his feet and ankles, and that he is now all but blind from milky cataract in both eyes, - he is able to distinguish black from white, but cannot guide himself from one place to another, - his health in other respects is good, he eats well and is generally cheerful.

I have also the honour to report that "Khurruck Singh," another state prisoner in H.M. Jail, has enjoyed excellent health during the past half year, and that he is now well and more contented than he generally is.

Singapore,
1st July 1853

I have etc.,
Sd. Jas. Cowper.

“
The windows in Bhai Ji's
cell were walled up
”

“
He was denied
walks in the open
”

During the next three years Bhai Maharaj Singh's health deteriorated further and he was reduced to a mere skeleton. The Civil Surgeon, Singapore recommended in 1853 that Bhai Maharaj Singh should be allowed an occasional walk in the open, but unfortunately, this suggestion was turned down by the Government of India for security reasons. The result was that Bhai Maharaj Singh's health continued to deteriorate and about two months before his death, his neck and tongue became so swollen, that it became difficult for him to swallow anything.

In a report dated 1st July 1856 the Medical Officer reported:

Sir,

In forwarding the half-yearly report on the health of "Maharaj Singh" and "Khurruck Singh" state prisoners in H.M. Jail here I have the honour to state that, "Khurruck Singh" has had no complaint and is now in excellent health, and that Maharaj Singh's health during the last two months has been very much impaired, a cancerous sore has formed on the left side of his tongue, which on different occasions has caused considerable loss of blood, and the glands on the same side of the neck have become swollen and contrusive. For two or three weeks he has eaten very little and for several days he has only taken a little kanjee (starch) and water.

I have formed a very unfavourable opinion of the case and take this liberty to recommend that both prisoners be allowed a little freedom for the benefit of change of air; as the smell from the cancerous sore is very offensive and felt throughout their apartments. "Maharaj Singh" being in a very delicate state, I would recommend that he be allowed a drive in a Gharry, a few miles into the country twice or thrice a week.

I have etc.,
Sd. Jas. Cowper
Residy. Ass. Surgeon.

Bhai Maharaj Singh died in prison on the 5th of July 1856. His death was reported by the Governor of the Straits Settlements to the Governor-General in Calcutta.

To : The Secy. to the Govt. of India, Fort William
Dated Singapore, 12th July 1856

Sir,

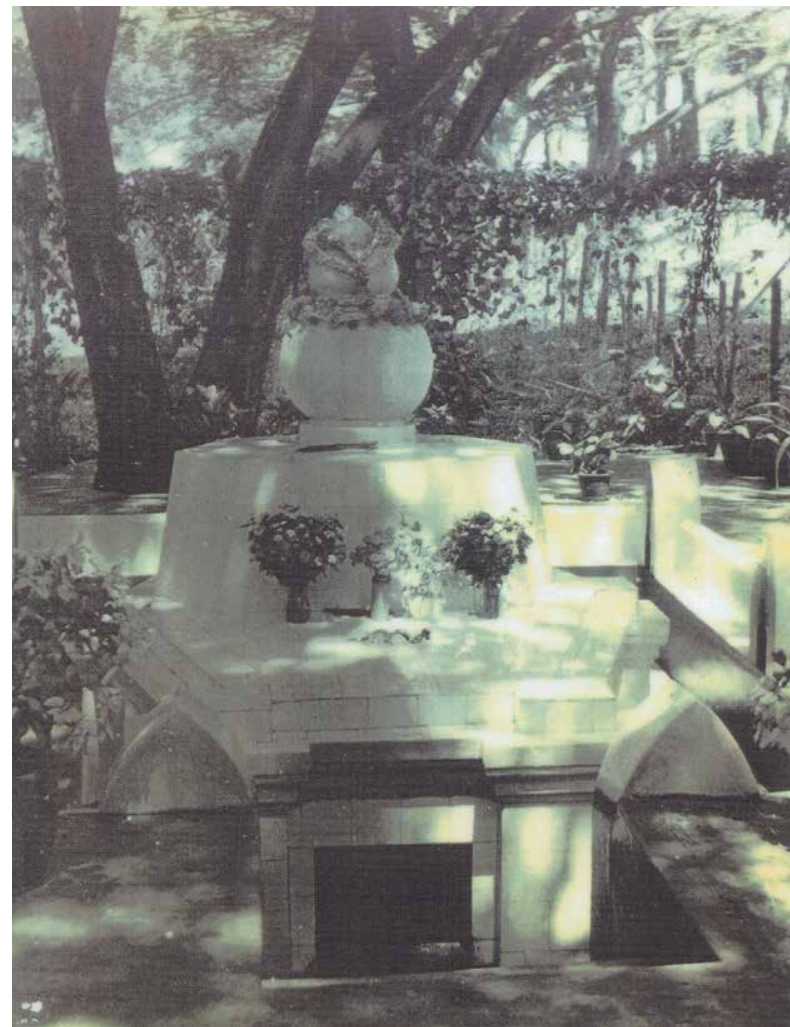
I have the honour to report to you for the information of the Right Honourable the Governor General of India in Calcutta that the state prisoner, "Bhai Maharaj Singh" died on the 5th instant.

2. On the 1st instant, the civil surgeon reported the illness of this state prisoner and recommended some relaxation of his confinement by being permitted to take occasional exercise in a carriage. This I deemed it right to accede to.

3. Both the civil surgeon and the resident councillor of the station have strongly recommended that some relaxation of his confinement should be extended to the surviving state prisoner "Khurruck Singh", and pending instructions from His Lordship in Council, I have consented to allow of his taking foot exercise in the immediate neighbourhood of the jail where he is confined, attended by a peon. This personage has of late years, demanded himself in the most quite, inoffensive manner. He is now alone, and consequently, in almost solitary confinement.

I have the honour to be,
Sir,
Your most obedient servant
Sd. G.M. Blundel
Governor

Bhai Maharaj Singh was cremated on a plot of land outside Outram Road Prison. Most probably, Khurruck Singh, his disciple, must have been allowed to perform the last rites of his Guru, the Ardas and recitation of the Sohila, as Khurruck Singh was by now allowed to move about outside the prison. Khurruck Singh also died in prison some time later but there is no record of the date of his death.

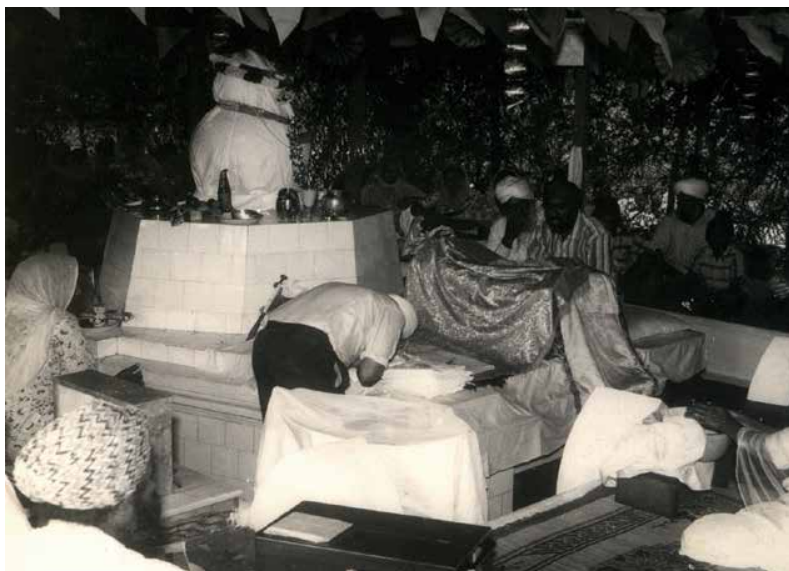


The Shrine in the Singapore General Hospital compounds

CHAPTER III

Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial

Adapted from articles written by Dr Choor Singh Sidhu

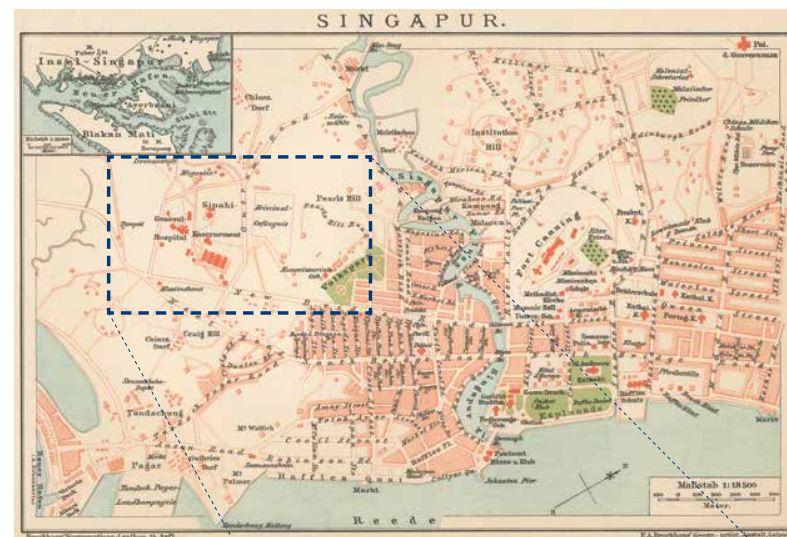


The Shrine at General Hospital with Sri Guru Granth Sahib Prakash

SHRINE AT SINGAPORE GENERAL HOSPITAL

In the grounds of the old Singapore General Hospital, on the side of the road which led to the old red-bricked maternity hospital on the hill, there used to be a small tombstone which looked more like a roadside mile-stone. But I do not remember seeing anything written on it. I passed by it several times in 1925 on visits to a relative at the maternity hospital and again in 1940 when my son Daleep Singh was born in that maternity hospital. After the Second World War, some Tamils started putting flowers at the foot of the tombstone. Some Sikhs followed suit but it was the Tamils who put up some masonry on the ground around it. Some green flags and poles were also stuck around it, probably by Muslims who believed the tombstone was a

Map of city of Singapore in the 1890's



References on the map:

- A. Site of Outram Prison.
It is now the Outram housing estate and Outram MRT Station.
- B. Cremation site of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji. It is now the SGH Mortuary.
- C. Present site of Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road
- D. Site of first Gurdwara in Singapore at Pearl's Hill



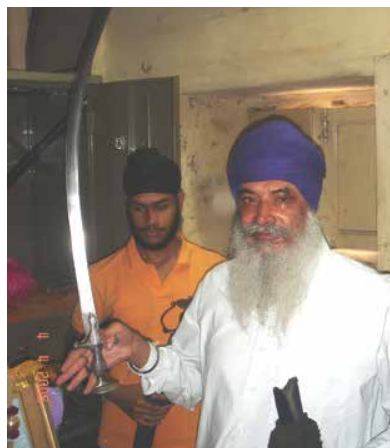
Kramat (memorial for a Muslim Saint). Some Sikhs started believing that it was the tombstone of Bhai Maharaj Singh while others believed it was of Baba Karam Singh. Nothing is known about this Baba Karam Singh. However, the Sikhs went one step further than the Tamils. They put up a structure over the tombstone. Very soon they installed the Granth Sahib there and the place became a full-fledged Gurdwara. Regular prayer sessions and functions were held with large crowds of followers in attendance. Regular prayers were held there and an elderly Sikh lady, Ram Kaur, resided and did sewa.



Bhai Ji's Kanga, Kara and Kirpan at his Dera in Amritsar

It is true that after Maharaj Singh Ji, the person who succeeded to his guddhee (throne) at Naurangabad, which was known as the Hoti Mardan Wali Sant Khalsa Sampardai, a Religious Order, was Bhai Ram Singh. His successor was a Baba Karam Singh but this Baba Karam Singh never came to Singapore. As a result of this lineage of succession, there were some Singaporeans who believe that Bhai Maharaj Singh was also known as Baba Karam Singh. However this is incorrect.

“
Baba Karam Singh never
came to Singapore
”



▲ Bhai Ji's Gutkas currently at the Dera

◀ Baba Gurrajpal Singh Ji holding the double edge Kirpan that was used by Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji

Incidentally, the Hoti Mardan Wali Sant Khalsa Sampardai still exists and is now at Gurdwara Karam Sar (Rara Sahib) in district Ludhiana. Today, there is another Dera Bhai Maharaj Singh in Amritsar. It is also known as Nihanga Wali Showni, reflecting his religious and martial lifestyle. We can find exhibits of items used by Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji during his lifetime; especially the weapons used by him in his struggles against the British, kept in this Dera. The artifacts are maintained by one of his descendants, Baba Gurrajpal Singh Ji.

In 1922, when I was a student in Outram School, I heard from some members of the Sikh Contingent, whose barracks were next door to my school, that the tombstone in the General Hospital grounds was originally at the site where Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji was cremated. It was



Flowers by devotees at the Shrine

on a plot of land of Outram Road and later, probably when Outram School was built, it was shifted to high ground which later became the compound of the old General Hospital. In 1922 on the present grounds of the General Hospital, adjoining Outram Road there was a Malay kampong (village) and at the site of the General Hospital mortuary there was a large Hindu Temple which was demolished to make way for the mortuary. The temple was re-sited at the corner of New Bridge Road and Kreta Ayer Road. It was probably because of the Malay kampong and the Hindu temple next to it, that Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji's tombstone was re-sited well away from Outram Road on vacant land which later became the grounds of the General Hospital.

There is support in the writings of some Punjabi writers for the view that Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji's samadh (tombstone) was first erected on vacant land outside Outram Road Prison. For example, one Sher Singh, using Brij Bhasha language, writes in his book, "Sri Bir Margesh Gur Bilas", at page 1562:

(Ultimately, in 1905 (AD 1850) he was sent to Kala Pani (Penal Settlement of the British). After residing there for several years he passed away. Even now at the Penal Settlement there is Bhai Maharaj Singh's samadh (tomb) where every day Parsad (a sacred offering) is offered, all sorts of vows are fulfilled and his samadh is worshipped in Singapore, Malaya, outside the jail.

Most of these books in Punjabi were written in the twentieth century. I have not been able to find any book written in the nineteenth century soon after Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji's death.

For some reasons, the tombstone found in the grounds of the General Hospital, if at all it is a memorial to a Sikh Saint then, it is to the great Saint-Soldier Bhai Maharaj Singh, the hero of Sikh resistance to the British occupation of the Punjab. Furthermore, it must not be forgotten that Bhai Maharaj Singh was also the Head of the Religious Order, now known as the Hoti Mardan Vali Sant Khalsa Sampardai, which had been

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The shrine was first
outside the Outram
Prison

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Then the shrine was at
the General Hospital

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Kirtan at the Shrine



established by Bhai Daya Singh, one of the five Panj Payaras of Guru Gobind Singh. It was originally known as "Guru Gobind Singh Khalsa Lok Seva Dal". There have been, in recent times, several other illustrious Heads of this Religious Order e.g. Sant Attar Singh and Sant Ishar Singh who were spiritual descendants of Bhai Maharaj Singh. Bhai Maharaj Singh was therefore not only a revolutionary fighter who tried to save the Sikh Kingdom, but also, a recognised religious personage of very high standing, a true Saint of the Sikh faith who died a martyr. Some Sikhs, both in India and Singapore, even believe that he was a Karniwal (possessor of supernatural powers).

Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji was undoubtedly one of the great Saint-Soldiers of the Sikh faith, who has left behind a rich spiritual legacy and merits a

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True Saint of Sikh faith

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memorial in Singapore, if for no other reason, then, for the simple reason that he died in Singapore. Many Singapore Sikhs unfortunately are not aware of this. What better memorial could there be than to rename and rebuilt Silat Road Gurdwara, as Bhai Maharaj Singh Gurdwara. It is hardly a kilometer, as the crow flies, from the place where he was detained for six years, where he died and where he was cremated. Furthermore, Silat Road has been renamed Jalan Bukit Merah and the expression "Silat Road Gurdwara" has become a misnomer.

It will be remembered that there are several small Gurdwaras built in the Golden Temple Complex at Amritsar in memory of Sikh martyrs, e.g. Baba Deep Singh Gurdwara. It is of fundamental importance that Sikhs who believe that prayers are granted when intercession of Bhai Maharaj Singh is invoked, should worship in his Gurdwara and not at his samadh (tombstone). The practice of worshipping at a samadh of a Saint, no matter how holy, is gross violation of the tenets of the Sikh faith. This is another reason why a mini Gurdwara with its own Guru Granth Sahib, has been installed at the site of Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial. It will enable and hopefully encourage those seeking his intercession, to pray in his Gurdwara instead of his samadh.

The reason for establishing a Memorial Gurdwara in Singapore for Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji is not because he was a great and admirable revolutionary who fought the British to save the Sikh Kingdom, but because he was a Saint of the Sikh faith and the Head of a great Religious Order which is directly connected with Guru Gobind Singh. It is the martyrdom in Singapore of this great Saint which warrants a memorial and in the Sikh tradition the most appropriate memorial to a Shaheed (Martyr) is a Gurdwara. For example, in Amritsar there are a number of Gurdwaras built as memorials of Saints and Shaheeds (Martyrs) such as Gurdwara Baba Atal Rai Sahib Ji, Shaheed Ganj Baba Deep Singh Ji, Shaheed Ganj Baba Gurbaksh Singh Ji Shaheed, Gurdwara Baba Basant Singh Ji and several others. More importantly, this will help Singapore Sikhs understand the legacy of Guru Gobind Singh, since Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji was a spiritual descendant.

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The Memorial was
established not because
he was a freedom fighter,
but because he was a
Saint soldier

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The Shrine in front of Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road in the 1970's

SHRINE AT ENTRANCE OF SILAT ROAD SIKH TEMPLE

In October 1963, the Sikh Advisory Board passed a resolution to the effect that the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji should be removed from the Samadh in the grounds of the Singapore General Hospital. However this resolution was not carried out until 1966 when the Singapore Government stepped in and decided that it was no place for a regular Gurdwara and requested the Sikhs to demolish the structure. There was also a pressing need to expand the facilities of the Singapore General Hospital and this place was needed by them. This upset some of the devotees but an understanding was reached between the leaders of the Sikh community and the Government.

On 12th October 1966, after an Ardas by the late Bachan Singh Brahmputra, the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, and the Nishan Sahib (Sikh Nation Flag) were respectfully taken in a procession of motorcars, escorted by the police to the Silat Road Gurdwara. The police escort was seen as a sign of respect for the importance of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji's contribution to the freedom struggle and the continued support of the Sikh Police Contingent in the early development of Singapore. At the same time, the Sikh devotees also brought part of the original samadh of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji from the hospital grounds. This was placed near the entrance of the former Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road but without installing the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji, in the new structure.

The shrine was transferred to the newly built Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial in 1994. As a large number of Sikhs (mostly women) had a lot of faith and still continued to donate large sums of money and worship at this samadh (tombstone). To overcome this unacceptable practice, which is entirely against the tenets of the Sikh religion, it was decided to install the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji there in 1994 and change it to a Memorial Gurdwara instead of a samadh (tombstone).



*Sri Guru Granth Sahib
Prakash at the Memorial*

BHAI MAHARAJ SINGH MEMORIAL

The Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial that was built in 1994 was designed for personal prayers and meditation. There was very little space designed for the sangat to sit for any Path or Kirtan programmes. Very quickly the space in this Memorial Gurdwara was inadequate for the devotees at the Memorial site. Temporary platforms and tents had to be put up each time a major program was held at the Memorial Gurdwara.

In 2008, when the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board embarked on the programme to refurbish the Central Sikh Temple, it also decided that they would also concurrently tear down the existing structure and build a completely new Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial on the same location; but with a bigger darbar hall to cater for more sangat.

Construction of the New Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial started in January 2010 and was completed in July 2010 at a cost of approximately Singapore Dollars 500,000. The sangat was most supportive in the fund-raising that was done towards this cause, reflecting the faith and belief in this Memorial Gurdwara. During this interim period of construction, the religious services for Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial were conducted at the Mini Darbar on Level 2 of the Sikh Centre.



*Devotees place flowers above
the Memorial*

The New Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial was officially declared open by Minister Mentor Lee Kuan Yew on 3rd July 2010. During his visit MM Lee Kuan Yew addressed the sangat in the Main Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road Darbar Hall on Level 2. He commended the Sikh Community on its more than proportionate contribution to the development of Singapore.

This visit was the last time MM Lee Kuan Yew, the Founding Prime Minister of Singapore, was hosted by the Sikh Community in Singapore. He passed away on 23rd March 2015.

There is no shortage of worshippers nor of donations by devotees at this Memorial Gurdwara. Anyone visiting the Silat Road Gurdwara, first visits this Memorial Gurdwara, and it is only after paying homage here, do devotees enter the main Silat Road Gurdwara.

Gatka demonstration in front of Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial



Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji is the favourite Saint of the Sikh ladies. Some of them light candles at the back of the shrine and seek his intercession in their prayers. The belief that prayers are answered by his intercession is very strong. There is ample proof that some grateful devotees' prayers have been answered by the intercession of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji. At every golak opening, there is always a presence of foreign currencies indicating that Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial Gurdwara has been attracting an international following.

A turban for MM Lee Kuan Yew





MM Lee Kuan Yew being presented a Kirpan by S. Kartar Singh Thakral



MM Lee Kuan Yew unveiling the plaque in July 2010



Front door of the new Memorial Gurdwara in 2010



Sri Guru Granth Sahib Prakash at the Memorial



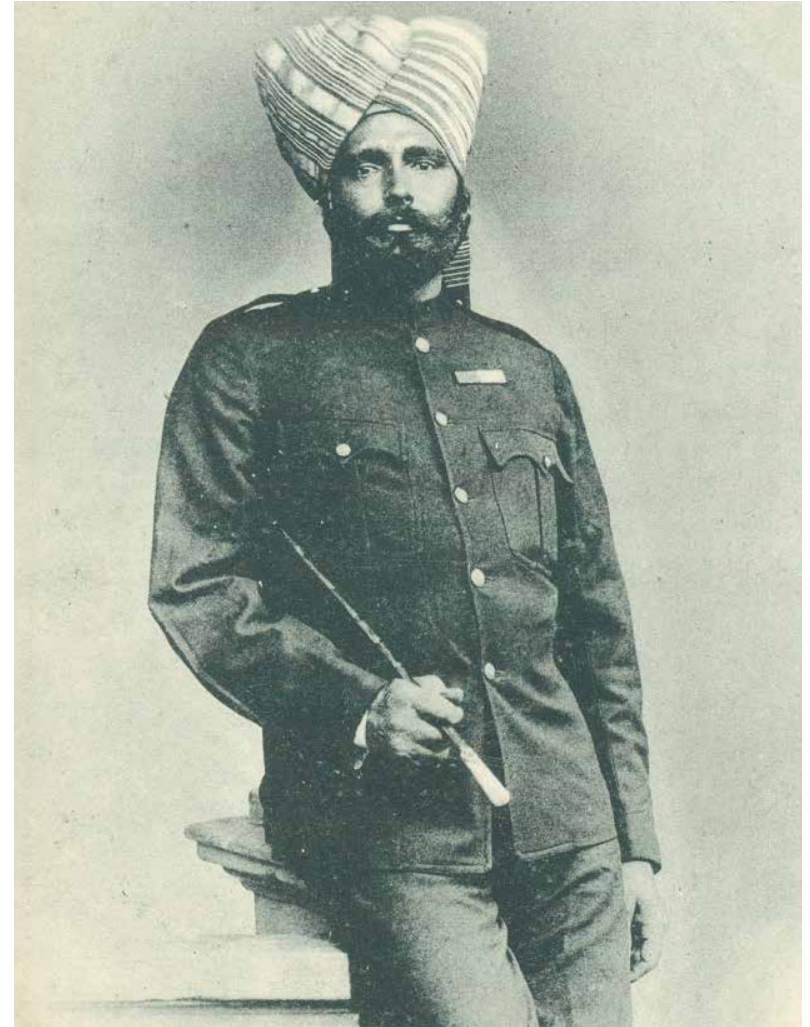
The dome of the original Shrine is still at the Memorial Gurdwara



Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial in 1994



The new Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial in 2010

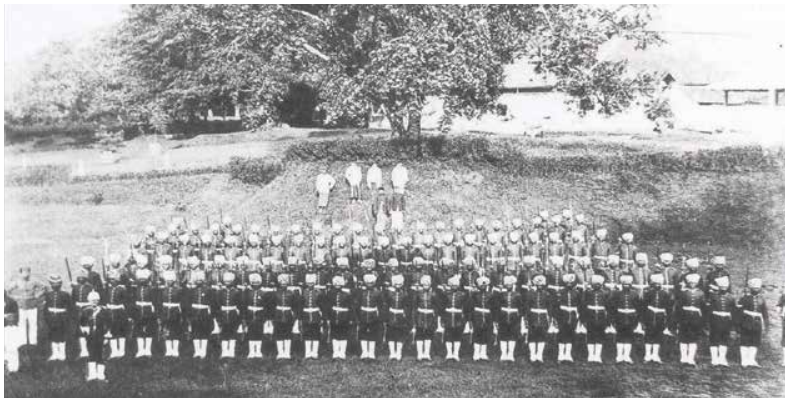


Sikh Police Officer in early 1900's

CHAPTER IV

Singapore Sikh Police Contingents

Adapted from an article written by Dr Choor Singh Sidhu



Sikh Police Force in Singapore. Photograph in 1890.

(Photo : Courtesy of National Archives Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur)

FIRST SIKH POLICE CONTINGENT

In 1879, a Commission of Inquiry set up by the Straits Settlements Police Force, in Singapore, recommended the introduction of a Sikh Contingent as a means of bolstering the local Police Force. British officers who had served in the Punjab such as Sir Hugh Clifford, who later became Governor of the Straits Settlements, were evidently impressed by the performance of the Sikhs as sepoys and sought to have their services in the Straits Settlements as well.

On 26th March, 1881 an Assistant Superintendent and fifty-four Sikhs arrived initially from the Punjab, while a further batch arrived subsequently in August, to form the Sikh Contingent of the Straits Settlements Police Force. By November 1881 the full contingent, comprising 165 Sikhs of all ranks, for the Straits Settlements, was fully constituted. The Assistant Superintendent was Mr. Stevens, of the Indian Police Force; he had volunteered for service in the Straits Police Force; he brought the Sikhs from the Punjab. He was their first commanding officer and had much to do with the success of the experiment to establish an overseas Police Force. The Sikh Contingent proved an immediate success and the service became very popular in the Punjab. Many looked forward with great pride and honour for an opportunity to serve in the Force. In his 1881 report,

Major Dunlop, the Inspector-General reported: "I have no hesitation in stating that the Sikh Contingent will form the nucleus of an admirable armed police". Nine years later in 1890 Major Dunlop reported that the Sikhs were the best and most satisfactory contingent in the force.

In the Straits Times of 2nd February 1893 the following was reported:

"Yesterday morning, in the legislative Council Chamber, Singapore, Sir Charles Bullen Hugh Mitchell was sworn in as Governor and Commander-in-Chief of the Straits Settlements and its Dependencies. Among the visitors in the Chamber were the Senior Naval Officer, leading men of the mercantile community, most of the lawyers, nearly all the consular Corps and several well-known Chinese, including Mr Tan Jiak Kim. A force of Sikh police lined the approaches to the Chamber and acted as Guard of Honour. A complement of European police kept order among the crowd of people".

Sikh Police Officer Guard of Honour for Duke of Connaught's visit to Singapore in early 1900's.

Evidently, by 1893, the Sikh Contingent had been well trained and was well established as a disciplined and respected Force. It was considered good enough to form a ceremonial Guard of Honour.



In "One Hundred Years of Singapore", by Makepeace, Brook and Braddell, it is reported in Volume 1 at page 253:

In 1894 large parts of the Sikh Contingent volunteered and were employed in Pahang during the disturbances there. In 1891 and 1892, the Sikhs were employed on beat duty, and, proving a great success, having been so utilised ever since.

Finally, it may be recorded with satisfaction that during the mutiny of 1915, the Sikhs stood fast, and proved themselves worthy of their salt.

The Sikh Contingent sometimes provided a Guard of Honour on ceremonial occasions, such as the opening of the Assizes in the Supreme Court. It was a very grand sight to see the tall Sikhs – all specially chosen six footers, resplendent in their ceremonial uniforms forming the Honour Guard in front of the Supreme Court for inspection by the Chief Justice of Singapore. The Sikh Contingent used to be commanded by an English officer. These officers were sent for a couple of years to Lahore, the then capital of the Punjab, to learn Punjabi and some of them spoke really good "Teht Punjabi" (colloquial Punjabi). The Sikh officers holding the highest rank was the "Subedar" who enjoyed great prestige amongst the Sikh community. One such Subedar named Gurmukh Singh was held in such high esteem by his superior officers that he was awarded in the King's Birthday honours, the Order of the British Empire (OBE), a very high honour indeed. Gurmukh Singh was also the first person in the local Sikh Contingent to be promoted to the rank of Subedar-Major. Before that the highest rank was Sergeant-Major. After Gurmukh Singh, there was also always one Subedar in the Sikh Contingent. Some other Subedars after Gurmukh Singh were Sunder Singh, Tota Singh, Chanan Singh, Sardara Singh and Gopal Singh.

Members of the Sikh Contingent also performed police duties in Penang, Malacca, Labuan and Christmas Island; the first two towns, were part of the then Straits Settlements. The Sikh Contingent was disbanded after the Second World War. It was then 500 strong. Most of the men were repatriated to Punjab but some stayed back. Others came back after leaving their families behind in Punjab.



Straits Settlement Police Force Badge in the late 1800's and early 1900's

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It was a grand sight to see the Sikhs forming the Guard of Honour in front of the Supreme Court
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Malayan Railways Police Force Badge in the 1920's

“
The birth of the Sikh Community in Singapore
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The recruitment of Sikhs in the Straits Settlements Police Force is the first recorded case of an influx of Sikhs in large numbers into Singapore. It took place in 1881, and, it marked the beginning of a local Sikh community. There is no documentary evidence as yet to support the presence, prior to 1881, of any sizable body of Sikhs in Singapore. As the British had no jurisdiction in Punjab before its annexation in 1849 there is no possibility of Sikhs having been sent to Singapore before 1850 as prisoners or otherwise. Bhai Maharaj Singh and his Tehlia (attendant) Khurruck Singh were undoubtedly the first Sikhs to step on the soil of Singapore in 1850. They were State Prisoners deported to Singapore and were confined in Outram Road Prison. Bhai Maharaj Singh was an important political prisoner who fought the British to save the Sikh Kingdom. He died in Prison in 1856. His memorial shrine is at Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road.

The first batch of Sikh policemen in Singapore paved the way for a subsequent influx of more Sikhs into Singapore. For instance, some of the Non-Commissioned Officers (NCOs) of the Sikh Contingent who returned to their native Punjab while on vacation spoke freely about the opportunities available in Singapore. Many villagers were attracted and subsequently followed these NCOs back to Singapore. Still others came on their own accord or were aided by friends to come into the region with the hope of joining the Government Police Force. Not all who came managed to join the Police Force in Singapore or Malaya. Nevertheless, many who failed to find employment with the Government obtained jobs as security guards and watchmen for private employers. The tall and sturdy Sikhs, renowned for their martial reputation and valour, were eagerly sought after by private employers as watchmen, commonly called in those early days in the Malay language as "Jagas."

The recruitment of the Sikhs by the Government in 1881 as "sepoys" for the Sikh Contingent of the Straits Settlements Police Force represents the birth of the Sikh Community of Singapore. The first batch of Sikhs was from the districts of Patiala, Ludhiana and Ferozepore. Inspired by Sikhs from the Police Force writing home about the good life in Singapore, and the easy money which could be earned as a watchman, by merely standing at the door of a building, many more Sikhs ventured abroad and found employment in Singapore. By 1911, there were 195 Sikhs in Singapore. (Government Census Report of 1911).

The natives of Bengal arrived when Sir Stamford Raffles founded the colony of Singapore in 1819. The Sikhs came later. But in the eyes of the simplistic local population, the Sikhs were also called Bengalis. It was customary among many old fashioned Chinese families then to instill fear in children when they misbehaved by invoking the words “Mankali Lai Lo” – i.e. the fearsome Sikh (Bengali) has come!

The Sikh Contingent also played an active role leading to the birth of the Singapore Police Force band. It was established in 1925 and was known as “The 2nd Straits Settlements Police Band”. Headed by an Englishman, the first batch of bandmen were recruited directly from Punjab as there was very few locals that could read music. The band comprised of an entire band troop of 33 Sikh police bandmen. These Sikh bandmen were a regular hit with both the local population and the British authorities. They were called upon to entertain important guests at state functions and perform other ceremonial duties. For the local audience, regular performance was held at the Botanical Gardens.

By 1920s there was in Singapore a sizable community of civilian Sikhs in addition to the members of the Sikh Contingent of the Police Force. According to the Government Census Report of 1921, there were 1,022 Sikhs in Singapore. This figure included the members of the Sikh Contingent which by then had grown considerably in size. Important Government offices and installations were guarded by members of the Sikh Contingent, especially during week-ends and on holidays. The civilian Sikhs played an equally important part in rendering trustworthy security services to the rest of Singapore. Many Chinese businessmen had personal Sikh bodyguards who often stayed with their families at the Towkay's premises or residence. These Towkays virtually entrusted the security of their families to the Sikh Jagas. And, in return, the Towkays looked after the Sikh Jagas creditably.

The Government House (the Istana), Government Treasury and the Secretariat in Empress Place, the Telegraph Office in Robinson Road, the Waterworks at Woodleigh, Shell's oil storage tanks in Woodlands, the Gun-powder Depot at Bedok and the Chartered Bank at Raffles Place were guarded at the week-ends, some even daily, by members of

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Singapore Police Force
Band of 33 Sikhs
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Rendering trustworthy
security services
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Big, Strong and Friendly
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The Sikh contingent as
shock troops
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the Sikh Contingent. Every bank, including the Chartered Bank, every godown by the banks of the Singapore River, every major store, no matter where it was, every factory and every school and every house of a rich Towkay was guarded by Sikh watchmen, called Jagas. Today, Jagas are more elegantly called Security Guards. Even the Chartered Bank then carried an advertisement showing a sturdy Sikh gentleman with the slogan “Big, Strong and Friendly!” It was a fitting tribute to the Jagas, despite their humble origins, to be so featured.

The members of the Sikh Contingent stayed in their barracks; the single men were at Pearls Hill while the few married men, who were allowed to bring their families to Singapore, lived at the Sepoy Lines Barracks at the corner of New Bridge Road and Outram Road, next to what was then known as the Outram Road School. Later, with the building of new police barracks, the position was reversed. Married men had their barracks on Pearls Hill, while the single policemen had their barracks at Sepoy Lines.

The Sikh Contingent was also used as shock troops whenever there was a disturbance or a riot amongst the local population. This was before the days of the Police Riot Squad which was formed only after the Sikh Contingent was disbanded, a few years after the Second World War.

TANJONG PAGAR DOCK POLICE FORCE

There was also the Dock Police Force consisting entirely of Sikhs employed by the Tanjong Pagar Dock Company Ltd, the fore-runner of the then Singapore Harbour Board and present day Port of Singapore Authority (PSA). This police force guarded the docks and godowns at the harbour at Tanjong Pagar and Telok Blangah. There were also smaller private security forces manned by Sikhs and employed by Companies which had large installations. One such force was at Pulau Brani which guarded the tin smelting Works of the Straits Trading Company Ltd. Another force, at Pulau Samboe, in Indonesian waters, guarded the Shell Company's oil storage tanks on the island. British contractors Topham, Jones and Railton, who were building the granite stone wall at the water front of the harbour, had a security force of their own consisting of Sikhs; these Sikhs guarded their worksites at the harbour as well as the granite quarries at Bukit Timah Hill.



Harbour Board Police Force Badge in the late 1800's and early 1900's

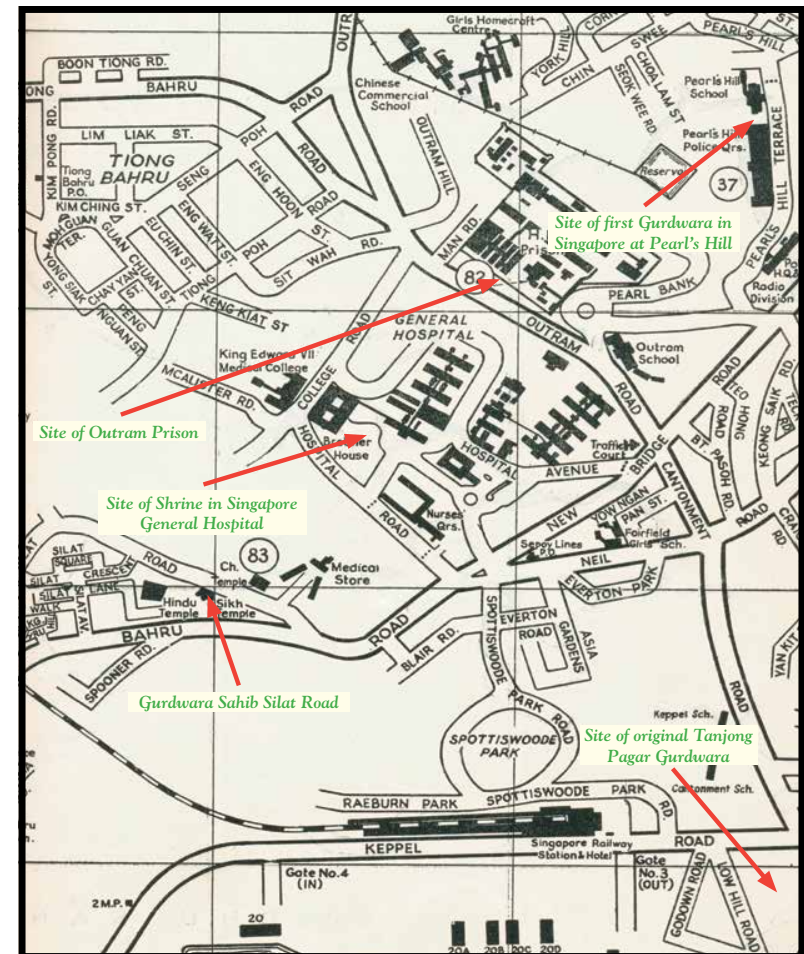
Deployment of the first Sikh policemen at the Tanjong Pagar Police Station

NAVAL BASE AND AIR BASE POLICE FORCE

By the 1930s, there was a very large Sikh Police Force at the Naval Base and another at the Royal Air Force (RAF) Base at Seletar. The 1931 census of Singapore showed that there were altogether 2,988 Sikhs living in Singapore, almost all engaged in providing security services in one form or another.

It is no exaggeration to say that the task of preserving peace, law and order in the early years of Singapore fell almost entirely on the shoulders of the Sikh community. The Sikhs were obviously a trusted community. The security provided by the Sikh community created an environment in which business and trade flourished and the young Colony prospered. Other ethnic communities benefited and prospered. Sikhs today can therefore be legitimately proud of the significant historical role their ancestors played in the security and stability of early Singapore under the British colonial administration.

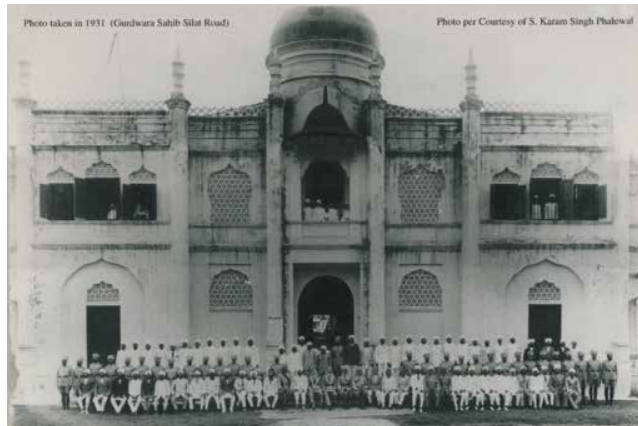
Location of Early Police Gurdwaras in Singapore



CHAPTER V

Singapore Sikh Police Gurdwaras

Adapted from articles written by Dr Choor Singh Sidhu



Members of the Sikh Police Contingent in front of Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road in 1931
(also known as Singapore Sikh Police Temple) with the Inspector/General of Police

BACKGROUND

To understand the historical contribution of Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road and its predecessor Sikh Police Gurdwaras in nation building and social cohesion, it is important to understand, appreciate and acknowledge the contribution of the early Sikhs in Singapore that gave birth to the foundation of the present Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road.

Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji can be acknowledged as the first Sikh to land ashore on Singapore soil. As there was no organised gathering for social interaction and confined to the boundaries of His Majesty Outram Road Jail, both Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji and Khurruck Singh Ji performed religious services by themselves. Deprived of their Guru Granth Sahib Ji which was not in their possession, Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji and Khurruck Singh Ji, were able to recite accurately and wholeheartedly the verses of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji without physical reference to the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji.

Remembering Waheguru Ji is the center piece of every Sikh. Guru Nanak Ji proclaimed that he had a vision in the late 1600's that one day his Sikhs will migrate outside of Punjab and they will bring along

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The first thing Sikhs do is
to set up a Gurdwara
”

with them the spirit of comradeship, living within the ideals of truthful living and establishing a place for social interaction in memory of Waheguru Ji. The place would be known today as a Gurdwara. There has been a saying that where there is a group of Sikhs in any part of the world, the first thing that they will do is to set up a Gurdwara. The Gurdwara will act as their focal point for both religious and social activities. Within the premises, their most revered Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji is enshrined as a living Guru.

The first evidence of organised religious activities in the form of a Gurdwara was with the arrival of the Sikh Police Contingent. These policemen were admired and entrusted as the guidance of the British Empire. They were instrumental in the setting up of the first Gurdwara in Singapore. The present Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road can trace back its roots to these policemen and the Gurdwaras associated with these early Sikh policemen.

Who were these Sikh policemen? Why were they recruited and brought by the British to Singapore? Why were they acknowledged for building Gurdwaras, propagating, maintaining and upholding the fine Sikh identity in a foreign land - Singapore? These were explained earlier in the previous chapter. The establishment of Gurdwaras by these policemen will form the main bulk of this chapter.

SIKH POLICE GURDWARA AT PEARLS HILL

Amidst the present Duxton Plain housing estate, laundry hangs like flags from hundreds of windows from high rise apartment blocks. A Gurdwara, no larger than a cottage lies almost buried in exuberant foliage. This was the first site of a permanent Gurdwara and the birth roots of the present day Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road. The Pearls Hill Gurdwara was established by the Singapore Sikh Straits Settlement Police Contingent.

The Straits Settlements Police were established in 1874. The first batch of 165 Sikh Policemen arrived in Singapore in 1881. The Police Force in Singapore was divided into two units in 1881, with one unit consisting mainly of Europeans and the second unit consisting entirely of Sikhs.

Accommodation and dietary requirements were looked into for the Sikh

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The first Gurdwara in
Singapore
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Policemen. The British administration made every effort to address their special living requirements. Great emphasis was placed on their well being as these policemen formed the backbone of maintaining law and order in Singapore. The Sikh policemen were staying in the barracks in Cantonment Road (the present site of Police Cantonment Complex at the junction of New Bridge Road and Cantonment Road). To fulfill their religious needs for a place for social interaction and worship, the Sikh policemen, requested the Inspector-General of Police, for a space to set up their Gurdwara. The Inspector-General accommodated their request and allowed them to convert a small hall in their barracks into a temporary Gurdwara Sahib. This was the birth place of the first known Gurdwara in Singapore within the compounds of the Police Force.

The British administration was most willing to oblige the Sikhs in allowing them to have their own place of worship within police compounds as the British had learned during their rule of India that the Sikhs derive their strength and direction from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji and the teachings of the 10 Gurus from Sri Guru Nanak Ji to Sri Guru Gobind Singh Ji. It was also an attempt to keep the Sikhs loyal to the British Empire as custodians for maintaining law and order. The establishment of the first Gurdwara brought together the first organised Sangat in Singapore in the presence of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. It can also be claimed that the Sikhs were the only community that had the privilege of having their house of worship within the police compounds. The same principle applied to the Military Bases in Singapore where their Gurdwaras were set up within or around the Military Bases. Privileges were not given out on a silver plate, but was earned by the Sikhs. It was the Sikhs who stood beside the British authorities defending the legitimacy of the British administration during the Great Mutiny in India in the 1800s. This loyalty was later seen throughout the British Empire, Shanghai - China, World War I and World War II.

With the arrival of more Sikh policemen over the years, the Sikh police and their families were all housed in the barracks in Pearls Hill instead of the barracks at Cantonment Road. It was seen as an upgrading of better accommodation given by the authorities. In around 1882, the Sikh police built their first permanent Police Gurdwara Sahib in Pearls Hill. This Gurdwara was a single storey wooden building with zinc roof.

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The Granthi's salary was
paid from Government
funds

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There was also a separate City Police Force. The Sikhs serving in this City Police Force were scattered all over the island. All these Sikhs used to go to the Pearls Hill Police Gurdwara Sahib for prayers. The management of the Pearls Hill Police Gurdwara Sahib was under the authority of the Pearls Hill Sikh Police. The most senior Sikh Police officer was usually nominated as President. The Inspector-General would appoint a knowledgeable religious police personnel to carry out the duties of a Granthi. Just like any other policeman, the Granthi's salary was also paid from Government funds. The police Granthi's main duties were to service the religious needs of the Sikh policemen and their families.

In 1932, the Gurdwara Sahib underwent renovation and was made into a more permanent structure. It was a single storey bungalow provided by the Government. It was a picturesque little Gurdwara Sahib with small rectangular hall which had a wide verandah all around it. It was a concrete building with a tiled roof and appeared to have been designed and built for use as a Gurdwara Sahib. Sunday services at this Gurdwara Sahib commenced at 5.00am and concluded punctually at 8.00am. Ten years later during World War II, in 1942 with the fall of Singapore, this Gurdwara Sahib was vacated due to the Japanese occupation of Singapore. The roof of the Gurdwara Sahib was damaged by the Japanese bombardment of the island. Secondly, no religious services were held as the Sikh policemen were rounded up and kept within the confines of the Japanese Imperial Army Detention Camps.

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The Gurdwara was
damaged by the
Japanese bombardment

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With the defeat of the Japanese in 1945, World War II ended. In September 1945, the British re-occupied Singapore. With the independence of India and the growth of nationalism in Malaya and Singapore, the British administration disbanded the Pearls Hill Police Force in 1950s. The Gurdwara Sahib building was taken over by the Colonial Government and converted into a residential Bungalow for an English Police Inspector. The Gurdwara Sahib assets were transferred to Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road which continued to function as the other Sikh Police Gurdwara in Singapore and was open to all Sikhs in Singapore.

In 1954, the premises of the then Pearls Hill Gurdwara Sahib were converted into a residential place to be used by the Special Branch of the Singapore Police Force. The compound of the Gurdwara and the barracks of the Sikh policemen and their families became the offices of the first Police Headquarters and later

the Ministry of Interior and Defence of independent Singapore.

SIKH POLICE GURDWARA AT TANJONG PAGAR

Of the 165 Sikh police personnel that arrived in Singapore in 1881, some of these Sikh police officers were posted to the Singapore Docks at Tanjong Pagar (now known as Keppel Harbour). A year later, 5 Sikh policemen were stationed at Christmas Island. Christmas Island was under the jurisdiction of Singapore and continued to attract Sikh policemen until Christmas Island was sold off to Australia in the 1950s. With the sale of the island to Australia, these Sikh policemen either returned to Singapore to seek employment or retired in Punjab.

The Tanjong Pagar Dock Company (forerunner of the Singapore Harbour Board and currently the Port of Singapore Authority) built barracks for the Sikh Dock Police in Anson Road, which housed a Sikh Gurdwara Sahib. The Gurdwara Sahib was set up to serve the Sikh Dock Police. The Sikh Police were stationed at the Tanjong Pagar Police Station which served as the focal point for the harbour security. The site of Tanjong Pagar Dock Sikh Police Gurdwara was later encompassed into the location housing the PSA police headquarters building and the former Glutton Corner.

At the turn of the century in the early 1900's, Anson Road had become a busy thoroughfare. Trams competed with bull carts for space. There was also pressure for the further expansion of the harbour, its wharves and docks. In 1912, there was a major facelift to the harbour. New concrete wharves were constructed to replace wooden wharves.

Around 1912, the Anson Road Police barracks and the Gurdwara Sahib were demolished as the Colonial Government acquired the land for the harbour expansion. The Tanjong Pagar Dock Company in their expansion plans in the late 19th Century had bought real estates in the Duxton, Spottiswoode, Everton and Raeburn which included site of the present of Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road. The Sikh Police Contingent were offered, by the Colonial Government, an alternative site at Silat Road (Silat Road was later enlarged and renamed as Jalan Bukit Merah in the 1970s) to build their new Gurdwara to replace the Anson Road Police Gurdwara. In the meantime, the assets of the Sikh Dock Police Gurdwara were transferred to Sikh Police Gurdwara Sahib, Pearls Hill.

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The Gurdwara was set up to serve the Sikh Dock Police

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The Silat Road site was offered by the Government to build Gurdwara

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The original building of Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road
ਇਹ ਗੁਰਦੁਆਰਾ ਸਾਹਿਬ ਸਿੱਖ ਪੁਲੀਸ ਕੰਨਟਿਜੈਂਟ ਸਿੰਘਪੁਰ

CHAPTER VI

Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road



Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road after construction was just completed in 1924

GURDWARA SAHIB SILAT ROAD - EARLY DAYS

In the early 1920s, there were only two Gurdwaras in Singapore. Members of the Sikh Police Contingent of the Straits Settlements Police Force had their permanent Gurdwara on Pearls Hill. The civilian Sikhs had their Gurdwara in Queens Street.

Upon the completion of the new building of the Queen Street Gurdwara in 1921, the members of the Sikh Police Contingent, seeing that the civilian Sikhs had now a large new Gurdwara, petitioned the Government for a grant of a piece of land for the building of a new Police Gurdwara. Their original Gurdwara building on Pearls Hill had become too small and was inadequate for the Contingent which had grown in size. Another reason for building a new Gurdwara was to have a building with not only a Prayer Hall, langgar and dining hall, but also many rooms on the ground floor which could be used to accommodate new arrivals from Punjab for a short period, until they found employment or moved to other destinations like Malaysia, Hong Kong, Shanghai, Indonesia or Manila.



Gurdwara Frontage

In December 1922, the Singapore Harbour Board leased the present land in Silat Road, comprising an area of 23,774 square feet to the Inspector General of Police. In October 1926, the Singapore Harbour Board sold this piece of land to the Government of Straits Settlement for \$16,800.

Bhai Wasawa Singh Thoorkot, a member of the Sikh Police Contingent, played an important part in raising funds for the Gurdwara Sahib building. He traveled to Malaya, Hong Kong and Shanghai in China to seek donations. The police personnel from the Sikh Police in Pearls Hill and Sikh Police Malaya also donated one month's salary for the project. In 1925, Bhai Wasawa Singh Thoorkot was awarded, a good service medal for his effort in raising funds to build a new Gurdwara for the Sikh Policemen. The presentation ceremony took place at Pearls Hill.



Foundation stone of Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road

This new Gurdwara Sahib was completed in 1924 at a cost of Straits Settlement \$54,000 of which 70% was raised by members of the police forces in Singapore and Malaya and the balance was donated by Sikhs in neighbouring countries. It was originally known as Singapore Police Gurdwara. The Inspector General of Police, a British officer, in the presence of the President, Subedar Sundar Singh, and other

British and Sikh officers, performed the opening ceremony. The British Inspector-General of Police would nominate a Sikh Policemen to be the President of the Gurdwara. The requirement that the President of Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road must be a Sikh police officer continued until 1981. This Gurdwara Sahib building was built in the traditional style of architecture with domes and arches making it the first Gurdwara in Singapore to be built in accordance to traditional styles of Gurdwaras that are found in the Punjab.

The first Granthi of this Gurdwara Sahib was Giani Nand Singh, a preacher of the Panch Khalsa Diwan, a reformist movement based in Bhasaur Village in the State of Patiala.

There were several rooms added to the new annex of the Gurdwara Sahib to accommodate Sikh travellers, especially police personnel and their families who were going on leave or for posting to Hong Kong, Shanghai in China, British North Borneo and Sarawak.

In 1937, the Government vested the Gurdwara Sahib property to the Silat Road Gurdwara Board of Trustees on a payment of \$16,800 to the Straits Settlement. The Board of Trustees consisted of ten members comprising three members each representing the Majha, Malwa and Doaba Sikhs and the tenth member representing both the Singapore Police Force and Naval Base Police Force. The President of the Gurdwara was always the Sikh Police representative.

During the Japanese occupation of Malaya and Singapore (1942 - 1945), many Sikhs died as part of the British military and police forces defending Singapore and Malaya. Times were hard during the Japanese occupation. To look after the welfare of widows of Sikh soldiers and policemen, a few Sikh widows and their children stayed in the rooms in the Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road. These widows and other civilian Sikhs played an important role in ensuring that the Gurdwara functions were kept going, came at high risk of an unhappy Japanese military force. To these sewadars (volunteers) the conducting of daily prayers and maintaining a free kitchen was of

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The Gurdwara land
was acquired for
\$16,800 and the
building was
constructed for
\$54,800 in 1924
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The first Granthi Giani Nand Singh



Accommodation at Gurdwara from the 1940's to 1960's



Original Gurdwara's Langgar Hall in 1960s - 1970s

upmost importance. Food was scarce, but the concept of free kitchen had to be maintained. With the surrender of the British forces in 1942, Sikh soldiers and policemen were detained as Prisoners of War in Singapore. There were about 10,000 Sikh soldiers and policemen rounded up from Singapore and Malaya as Prisoners of War and sent to Papua New Guinea. In return for their unselfish sewa (service), these widows numbering about 50 widows and their children were provided with provisions and basic necessities by civilian Sikhs. Gurdwara Sahib Khalsa Dharmak Sabha (a Gurdwara set up by the Malwa Sikhs) also provided these widows with provisions and basic necessities and financial assistance where necessary. At the end of the war, these widows were offered free sea passage and they were glad to be able to return to Punjab.

Soon after the Second World War, many young English educated Sikhs came to Singapore from Malaya in search of employment. Quite a few of them stayed in the Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road in rented rooms. The rental of rooms was fixed at \$5 per month. They did not mind three or four of them sharing a room in order to save cost. As and when they found employment, they moved out. Most of them became Teachers, Lawyers, Civil Servants and Military personnel. Some of them joined the Singapore Police Force.

In the late 1950s to 1960's, the Silat Road Gurdwara Sahib went through difficult times. There was migration of the ex-Sikh policemen back to Punjab. Some of them moved on to the other Gurdwaras in Singapore that were established along geographical areas of Punjab. A good example is the pull factor by Khalsa Dharmak Sabha (at 18 Niven Road) which attracted the most policemen to worship and congregate at this Gurdwara. The major advantage that Khalsa Dharmak Sabha had over the policemen was that the majority of the policemen were from the Malwa region of Punjab which encompassed the State of Patiala. In addition, the returning Prisoners of War from Papua New Guinea were far less than original 10,000 interned by the Japanese. Many died in detention camps. These returning soldiers decided to return back to Punjab.

There was also no Granthi and the attendance of Sangat was limited to a few faithful Sikhs. A Sikh resident of the Gurdwara Sahib, Bhai Sarban Singh used to do Parkash and Semapti of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji. With a lack of funds, the Gurdwara Sahib fell into a state of disrepair. As the Gurdwara was built on Sikh community land, there were many Sikh residents living in homes along the side and back of the Gurdwara. These residents were contributing only a token sum of money as rental for their homes. The monthly collection and a fall in attendance by the sangat continued to have a heavy financial burden on the Gurdwara. The Gurdwara Management Committee looked for alternative source of revenue and resorted in leasing out more of its premises. The ground floor of the Gurdwara Sahib was leased out to a High Street Sindhi merchant as storage area for the company's electronic goods.

Urgent solution was needed to preserve Singapore's first traditional style Gurdwara modeled after the architecture of famous Gurdwaras in Punjab. The Management Committee requested the Government through the Head of the Singapore Police Authority to intervene and amalgamate the Silat Road Gurdwara with the Queen Street Gurdwara Sahib.



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The ground floor of
the Gurdwara was leased
to a merchant for
financial support
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*Gurdwara Silat Road in the
1960's*



The old Gurdwara entrance

Coincidentally, during the late 1970s, there was a growing agitation by the Sikhs against the Singapore Government's decision to acquire the land on which stood the Queen Street Gurdwara. The land was acquired for urban redevelopment for Singapore's overall master plan. A win-win agreement was reached between the Government and the Sikh Community where an alternative piece of land was given at 2 Towner Road.

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Central Sikh Gurdwara
Board Act from 1981
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In 1981, the Singapore Government enacted the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board Act. This Board was appointed to manage the Silat Road Gurdwara Sahib and the Central Sikh Gurdwara Sahib. The Central Sikh Gurdwara Board appoints all the committee members of the Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road. From 1981 to 1987, the Singapore Government appointed all the 25 members of the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board.

The year 1987, saw the establishment of a membership based Gurdwara. Since then, elections are held in accordance to the constitution of the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board Bill where all 25 board members are elected by the members. The members of the Board, from amongst themselves, will elect and form the following committees to manage the overall operations of the Board and its Units:

- a. Executive Committee oversees the overall operations of the Board and its units. This Committee comprises the key office bearers of the Board and the Chairmen of the 3 operating units; namely Central Sikh Temple, Silat Road Sikh Temple and the Sikh Centre.
- b. Central Sikh Temple Management Committee, which manages the activities of the Central Sikh Temple
- c. Silat Road Sikh Temple Management Committee, which manages the activities of the Silat Road Sikh Temple
- d. Sikh Centre Management Committee, which manages the activities of the Sikh Centre



The marble "Double Prakash Palki" in the new Darbar Hall



Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road Complex in 2006

GURDWARA SAHIB SILAT ROAD - PRESENT TIMES

In the mid 1990s, Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road was extensively renovated and rebuilt at a cost of \$4 million. The facade of the original Gurdwara building was retained to preserve its heritage. The rest of the building was rebuilt and does not resemble the original.

Since the transfer of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji's shrine to the Silat Road Gurdwara Sahib, it has become overwhelmingly popular. The Sikhs and other devotees who visit this shrine and the adjoining Gurdwara Sahib hold it in great reverence. It is believed that an Akhand Path held at this Gurdwara Sahib by a devotee earns the devotee great merit. It is believed that prayers recited sincerely

from the heart are answered and vows have been fulfilled when a devotee worships at this shrine. This is the only Gurdwara Sahib in Singapore where langgar is prepared and served everyday. The Gurdwara is never short of sewadars throughout the day doing yeomen service. As early as 5am, some ladies and men arrive at the Gurdwara to prepare breakfast for the arriving worshippers and clean the premises. In short, it lives up to the name of feeding the masses. It is estimated that on an average day a total of 1,500 people pass through the Gurdwara, to seek guidance from the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji and partake in the langgar. On important days, the attendance can be as high as 8,000 people. The doors of the Gurdwara Sahib are open to all races and religions from all walks of lives. It is a warm and welcoming home of the Gurus, built by the people for the people.

To a non Sikh visitor, the concept of a langgar (free kitchen) may seem very unique. It is an important feature of the Sikhs. The tradition of langgar (a devotional vegetarian meal prepared and shared by the congregation) started some 500 years ago by the Sikh Gurus as a community kitchen which feeds all, regardless of status. It is based on one of the teachings of Guru Nanak Ji, which rejects the caste system, prevalent in the 16th Century,



Langgar being served at Gurdwara



Langgar Hall

and considered all men and women to be equal. The idea of the langgar is simple. All must sit down to eat together, regardless of social position, gender or religion.

All visitors and devotees pay homage both at the Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road and the Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial Gurdwara. There are no established rules as to which Gurdwara one should pay their first respect to; that is; the Memorial Gurdwara of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji or the main Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road, there is a tendency of the devotees to pray first at the Memorial Gurdwara and then proceed to the Silat Road Gurdwara Sahib, which is located next door on the second floor.

The newly rebuilt Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road was officially declared open by S. Kartar Singh Thakral on 23 October 1995. Kartar Singh Thakral, a philanthropist, has projected a positive



image of Sikhs in Singapore by transforming the image of the Sikhs from just providers of security and defence of the nation to that of being successful in any career from defence to academics and from medicine to international entrepreneurs. The Thakral Parwar has generously donated towards the building of Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road and the Sikh Centre. Many other individuals have committed their personal time and resources doing selfless seva at both the Memorial Gurdwara and Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road; notable amongst them are S. Kartar Singh Dalamnangal, Mata Udham Kaur, S. Jagjeet Singh Sehgal, S. Ujager Singh Malla and S. Niranjan Singh Phaphre Bhai Ke.

Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road is also well known for the number of religious programmes conducted there. There are 2 Akhand Paths (48 hours of continuous reading of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji) held every week; one commencing on Mondays and ending on

*Panj Pyare for Nishan Sahib
Salami*

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Declared a Historical Site
in 1999
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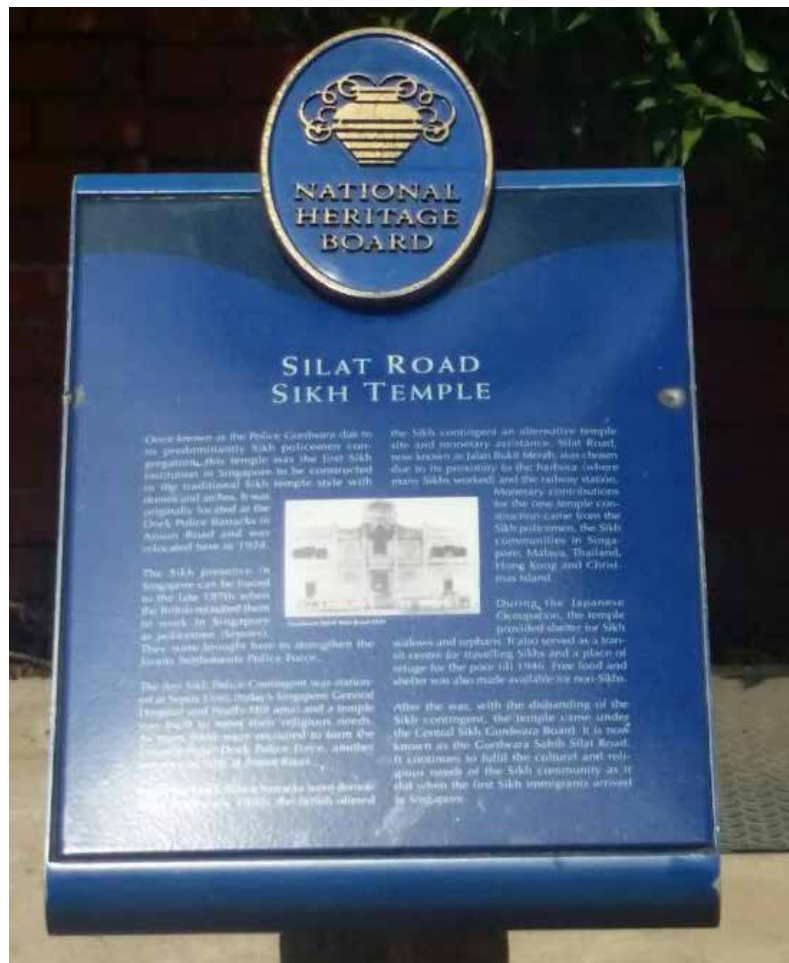
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Gurdwara Sahib Silat
Road finances all Sikh
Centre activities
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Wednesdays and another from Fridays to Sundays. Other religious programmes held here include Sukhmani Satsang, Sangrand, Kirtan Darbar and Simran Saadhna.

On 14th November 1999, the National Heritage Board declared the Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road as a Historical site. The Board has bestowed the prestigious heritage award on the Gurdwara based on the strong historical contribution of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji and the contribution of the Sikh Police Contingent to nation building. The Heritage Plaque was declared open by S. Inderjit Singh, MP, Ang Mo Kio GRC in November 1999.

Today, tracing back the days of the Sikh Police Gurdwaras in Singapore to the present Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road, the Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road had withstood the test of times. With a decline in Sikh Policemen enrollment in the country due to localisation of the Police Force, the Gurdwara also saw a migration of the sangat to other Gurdwaras in Singapore. Recently, this trend has reversed and the surpluses generated by Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road enables the Central Sikh Gurdwara Board to finance the activities of the Sikh Centre built in 2000 for the benefit of the Singapore Sikh Community.

Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road today attracts both Sikhs and non Sikhs alike. Tour operators, schools and grassroot organizations have been bringing local and foreign groups to the Gurdwara to learn about Sikhism and Sikh way of life.



Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road Heritage plaque



Gurdwara Silat Road Sikh Centre

CHAPTER VII

Gurdwara Silat Road Sikh Centre



Sikh Centre Opening in 2006. Unveiling of the plaque by President S. R. Nathan

THE SIKH CENTRE

The Gurdwara Silat Road Sikh Centre 7-Storey building was completed in 1998. The refurbishing of the building to conduct Sikh Centre activities was completed in 2000. Today it caters to the needs of the young and old alike. It boasts a fully equipped auditorium with retractable seats that seat 160 as well as a library, which is home to over 7000 books. It also has a Gym, Elder's lounge, Computer Classroom, Mini Darbar, Children's play area, Children Gurdwara, Gurmat Parchar Academy and the Gurmat Sangeet Academy.

The Sikh Centre, costing a total of \$5.2 million, was officially declared open by His Excellency, S. R. Nathan, President, Republic of Singapore on 30th July 2006, in conjunction with the 150th Anniversary of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji.

Suropa for President S. R. Nathan



Gurdwara Silat Road Sikh Centre (also known as Sikh Centre) is probably the Asia's first distinct Sikh Community Centre outside India. It was built to meet the growing needs of the Sikh community given the rapidly changing socio-economic situation of the country as well as an increasingly demanding education system. Sikhs in Singapore also saw the need to imbibe in the young a Sikh cultural and religious identity and hence gave Gurdwara Silat Road Sikh Centre a direction and purpose.

In addressing these issues, Gurdwara Silat Road Sikh Centre takes part in several national campaigns aimed at educating the community at large (including Sikhs and non Sikhs) such as the National Information Technology Literacy Programme as well as the Inland Revenue Authority



Adult Library



Children's Library

of Singapore's Volunteer E-Filing. The Sikh Centre, in addition to that, brought to the Sangat a series of "Money SENSE" lectures endorsed by the Monetary Authority of Singapore to help better their understanding of basic financial planning. It also endeavored to raise the awareness of Sikhism among Singapore's multi-racial society, by hosting various inter-religious organization visits throughout the year.

The Sikh Centre is also significant in augmenting the Gurdwara's role in propagating Sikhism. It offers to the Sangat a unique Sikhi learning experience that reaches out to all age groups. In the early days of the Sikh Centre, Mighty Khalsa sessions were organized for children aged 4 to 12. These activities were carried out in the Children's Gurdwara. In these sessions, children were taught core Sikh values such as honesty, compassion, humility and courage. Each session was a theme based on shabads, sakhis and games.



Mighty Khalsa session

SIKHI PARCHAR ACADEMY

The propagation of Sikhism was formalized around 2007 with the setting up of the Sikhi Parchar Academy in the Sikh Centre. A well-qualified lecturer from Punjab was recruited to conduct formal short term and long term courses in Sikhi and Gurbani both in English and Punjabi. The Academy has been very successful in its reach to all levels of Sikhs in Singapore and the region. The Sikhi lecturer has been invited to conduct Sikhi Workshops and Seminars in the region and in Australia. To meet the demands of the sangat in Singapore, a second Sikhi lecturer was hired in 2011. Since 2011, the Sikhi Parchar Academy activities are being organized and funded in collaboration with Sikh Missionary Society.



Speakers at the Sikh Centre Forums @ Sikh Centre Auditorium



Sikhi Parchar Academy Classes



Some of the more successful courses conducted by the Sikhi Parchar Academy include:

- a. Sikhism 101 Course - This is a one year course on the history and philosophy of the Sikh Religion and its Gurus. It includes explanation of some of the key compositions in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib. It is an adaption of a part time diploma course conducted by Sikh Missionary College in Ludhiana and uses the same text and reference material. The course is conducted in English and this made it most accessible to the groups with a low command of Punjabi.
- b. Sikhism 201 Course - This is also a one year course conducted in English and is a follow through of the Sikhism 101 course. It focuses on the value systems, key pillars and fundamentals of the Sikh Religion and its references in the Sri Guru Granth Sahib.
- c. Divine Reflections - A one year course in English focuses on one shabad from Guru Granth Sahib each week and the participants discuss the values it depicts and its key message.

Sikhi Parchar Academy
Graduation



- d. Sojhi - This is a formal Sikhi education programme for children from Nursery to Secondary School. There are 10 classes, segregated by age and their respective class levels in English schools. The material used is an adaptation of a similar programme developed by the Sikh Research Institute (SikhRI) in the United States of America. The course, which is conducted in English, covers the teaching and history of the Sikh Gurus and Sikhism. It also covers the recitation and explanation of the 5 Nitnem banis. The programme has been very successful and there are approximately 130 students in this programme. The programme is supported by a well qualified full time staff from Punjab.
- e. Short Courses on the various banis from Sri Guru Granth Sahib like Japji Sahib, Rehras Sahib, Sukhmani Sahib, Bhai Gurdas Varan, 22 Varan, etc.



Path classes for Sojhi students



Guru stories being told during
Sojhi classes

Gurdwara Silat Road Sikh Centre also organizes discussions and dialogues on various Sikh issues. The Centre invites intellectuals from around the world to lead such sessions. These activities engage the community and especially the youth to keep them anchored to the Sikh community at large.



Sojhi Class activities



Children doing Sewa as part of Sojhi

GURMAT SANGEET ACADEMY

The Gurmat Sangeet Academy is used as a tool to propagate Sikhi. The Academy instilled in many the love for Sikh music and heritage. Many students of the Gurmat Sangeet Academy went on to doing kirtan in Gurdwaras and at public performance stages like the Esplanade. The Academy initially started with one Gurmat Sangeet instructor at the Sikh Centre; however to meet the increased demand, a second location for the Gurmat Sangeet Academy was started in Central Sikh Temple in 2011 with an additional Gurmat Sangeet instructor.

Gurmat Sangeet Academy instructors and students performing at The Esplanade

The academy also holds Gurmat Sangeet Festivals regularly which includes a Kirtan competition, Raag Darbar and Gurmat Sangeet workshops.



Gurmat Sangeet Classes





Gurmat Sangeet Festival
Participants - Seniors and
Juniors

Gurmat Sangeet students
performing during Gurmurab
in Darbar Hall

GATKA ACADEMY

The Centre also established the Gatka Academy to teach Sikhs the Miri and Piri concept in Sikhism and to inculcate within them a sense of discipline and form. The academy was a great success and in the pinnacles of its success, members of the Gatka Academy were invited to India in 2001 to showcase their talents.

The Gatka Academy



HEALTHY LIFESTYLE, OUTREACH & OTHER ACTIVITIES

In uplifting the community, the Sikh Centre, under the banner of the Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji Community Services, organizes several Community Outreach Programmes. One such programme is the Programme for the Aged and Physically Challenged (APC) where volunteers ferry physically-challenged Sikhs to and from the Gurdwara once a month. This allows for the aged and physically challenged to stay connected to the Bani and to the Sikh Community.



Sikh Centre Outreach Programme



Senior Citizens' Lounge

In addition, the Sikh Centre is also a home to a free legal clinic. This free legal-clinic is conducted by volunteer lawyers from private practice. This service helps many to deal with legal issues and advise them what to do when confronted with situations that require legal advice. The Sikh Centre also has a Senior Citizens Lounge, Elders Corner and a gymnasium to cater to the needs of our elders.

Community service or Sewa by Gurdwara Silat Road Sikh Centre is not meant only for the Sikh Community. As a socially responsible organization in Singapore serving the needs of the larger community, the Centre has also adopted the secular Moral Welfare Home and the Mei Ling Street Home for the Aged as part of its outreach programme.



Gym at Sikh Centre



Computer Room

During major festivities, the Centre organizes donation drives for these homes as well as a day of celebration with these homes. Not only do these celebrations bring joy into the lives to those in the homes, it also offers an opportunity for the Sikhs to learn the meaning of compassion and selfless service.



Tae Kwan Do class



Parents' participation

Instilling a wholesome healthy lifestyle is part of the Sikh Centre mandate. Hence it organizes activities such as Tae Kwon-Do, Yoga and Bhangra lessons. The Sikh Centre hopes that these sessions will give Sikhs an opportunity to take up an activity that interests and benefits them. The Sikh Centre also brings and conducts talks by professionals on healthcare issues like, Diabetes, High Blood Pressure and Stroke to raise awareness and inculcate a healthy lifestyle.



Yoga class



Sports programme

The activities at Gurdwara Silat Road Sikh Centre caters to all socio economic classes and age groups and this has greatly enhanced its role as a Sikh Community Centre in Singapore. Its success thus far is testament to its potential to ultimately take on the shape of a Regional Sikh Resource and Heritage Centre. It is with the tremendous effort of the many volunteers that the Sikh Centre is such a resounding success. Gurdwara Silat Road Sikh Centre is always on the lookout in providing more wholesome and value added activities that would uplift the community.

Ardas to commence the sports activities



Gurdwara decorated for Bandhi Chhorh (Diwali) celebrations



Bandhi Chhorh (Diwali) Light-up at the Gurdwara

CHAPTER VIII

Major Celebrations at Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road Complex



Akhand Path during Major Celebrations

Besides the regular weekly religious activities held at the Gurdwara and the social and academic programmes conducted at the Sikh Centre, there are other major celebrations held on a grand scale here. The major celebrations include:

a. Bandhi Chhorh (Diwali)

The Gurdwara is well decorated and fully lit up for this occasion and devotees visit the Gurdwara all day long (in fact from the evening of the eve of Diwali) paying their respects and receiving Guru Ji's blessings. The Memorial Gurdwara is particularly busy and its surroundings are well lit with candles and divas brought by the sangat.



Buddhist monks and nuns visit Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road and Sikh Centre

Storytelling



Children's parties and games during Bandhi Chhorh celebrations



b. Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji's Birthday and Barsi Anniversary

These are celebrated in a grand way at the Gurdwara and Sikh Centre to honour the Saint Soldier. The regular events held in conjunction with these annually include:

- Akhand Path
- Kirtan by world reknown Jathas
- Inter-Gurdwara Sporting Championship for Golf, Soccer and Tug-of-War
- Distribution of ration to the needy

In 2006, which marked the 150th Barsi Anniversary of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji, the Gurdwara and Sikh Centre organized the following activities:

- Car Rally / Treasure hunt relating to the history of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji and Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road.
- Gurmat Knowledge Quiz
- Sikhi Seminars and Lectures.

Bhai Maharaj Singh Golf Championship



A set of commemorative coins celebrating the 150th anniversary



Front View



Rear View



Commemorative coins (gold, silver and gold-plated copper), CDs on the life of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji and his values and this book were also launched to mark this very special occasion.

The Official Opening of the Gurdwara Silat Road Sikh Centre was also held in conjunction with these celebrations and this official opening was conducted by His Excellency S.R. Nathan, President of the Republic of Singapore on 30th July 2006.

c. 400th Prakash Dihara of Sri Guru Granth Sahib Ji

The Singapore Sikh Community celebrated this grand occasion with a Nagar Kirtan Programme. The Nagar Kirtan was held inside a float built in the shape of the Golden Temple, Amritsar. The float procession started from Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road at dawn, passing through all the Gurdwaras in Singapore and ending at Central Sikh Temple late at night. The Guest of Honour at these celebrations was the President of the Republic of Singapore, His Excellency S.R. Nathan, who also visited the Golden Temple float. He was very impressed with the efforts of the Sikh Community in maintaining their cultural and religious values and heritage despite being away from their homeland.



Replica of the Golden Temple



Kirtan inside the float



President Nathan visits the float



Memorial decorated with flowers for the 150th Anniversary



Distribution of ration to the needy

Visiting renowned Ragis and Kathakars



Baba Makhan Singh



Bhai Chamanjit Singh Lal

Sangat listening to Kirtan at Memorial Gurdwara



d. 300th Anniversary of Gurgaddi Day in 2008 & Launch of Book (Sikhi – A Way of Life)

The Singapore Sikh Community celebrated this grand occasion with a Nagar Kirtan Programme. The Nagar Kirtan was held inside a float built in the shape of the Takhat Sachkhand Hazur Sahib. The float procession started from Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road at dawn, passing through all the Gurdwaras in Singapore and ending at Central Sikh Temple late at night. The Guest of Honour for this event was Deputy Prime Minister Jayakumar. During this event at the Sikh Centre, he also launched the book “Sikhi – A Way of Life”. This book was published by the Sikh Advisory Board and funded by the Sikh Missionary Society.



Float built as a replica of Takhat Sachkhand Sri Hazur Sahib



Kirtan inside the float

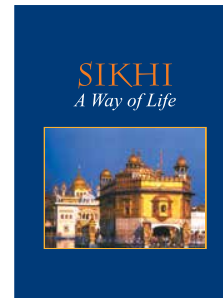


The float at Central Sikh Temple



DPM Jayakumar visits the float

Launch of the book "Sikhi - A Way of Life" by DPM Jayakumar



e. 159th Anniversary of Bhai Maharaj Singh and unveiling of Information Panels at Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road

In 2015, which marked the 159th Anniversary of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji and the 50th Anniversary of Singapore's Independence (SG50), the Gurdwara and Sikh Centre organized a whole string of special activities which included the following:

- Exhibition of artefacts of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji brought in from his Dera in Amritsar.
- Unveiling of the Information Panels for Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road and Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial by Deputy Prime Minister Tharman Shanmugaratnam on 4th July 2015
- Launch of this book by DPM Tharman Shanmugaratnam



Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road and Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial Information Panels unveiled by DPM Tharman

f. Other Exhibitions

I Guru Gobind Singh Ji's Relics

An exhibition of Guru Gobind Singh Ji relics given to Pir Buddhu Shah was held in 1999 in conjunction with the 300th Anniversary of Khalsa.



Exhibition on Guru Gobind Singh Ji relics given to Pir Buddhu Shah

II Commemorative Stamps



Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road & Bhai Maharaj Singh Commemorative Stamps

III Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji's Relics

The British Library in UK obtained some relics of Bhai Maharaj Singh Ji when he was arrested in India which included, a conch with a carved design (typically used during religious functions), a finger ring with inverted Gurmukhi inscriptions reading "Akal Sahai Maharaj Singh Ji" (to be used as a seal), a small kirpan, a sewing needle, cotton thread and two steel bracelets. These relics were loaned to the Indian Heritage Centre (IHC) in Singapore for a period of one year in conjunction with the official opening ceremony of IHC in May 2015.



Bhai Maharaj Singh sacred relics in the British Library UK

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Gurdwara Sahib Silat Road and Sikh Centre



Bhai Maharaj Singh Memorial